

# Nutrition Assistance: Helping Families Put Food on the Table

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Federal data show that the recession is making it increasingly difficult for families to meet basic nutrition needs. In 2008, 49.1 million people lived in food-insecure households up from 36.2 million in 2007, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. With the increase in unemployment in 2009 and 2010 it is likely those numbers have increased further and that more families live in households where getting enough to eat is a struggle.

The clearest indication of this growing need is the skyrocketing demand for food assistance. April 2010 marked the 17th consecutive month in which more people received SNAP benefits than at any time previously in the history of the program. More than 40.4 million people received the benefits in April, an increase of

approximately 320,000 in just one month. In the past two years, the number of Americans receiving SNAP benefits has grown by more than 12 million – a 44 percent jump.

Communities have been able to keep up with the demand thanks to a \$20 billion funding infusion through ARRA, which temporarily increased SNAP benefits by 13.6 percent. ARRA also lifted restrictions limiting how long unemployed individuals without children can receive SNAP benefits and provided \$500 million for the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, \$150 million for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and \$100 million for equipment grants for the school lunch program.

## Increased SNAP Allotments: Higher Quality Food and Healthier Kids

When Crystal Sears received an additional SNAP allotment last year, she called the local assistance office in Philadelphia to ask if it was a mistake. “No, it wasn’t a mistake,” the public assistance officer told her. The roughly \$80 a month increase was made possible by increased funding through ARRA.

The increased benefit meant Sears was able to buy fresh fruit instead of canned food and better quality foods for her children, who all have health problems. “This has helped my household a great deal. I have children with medical problems and I have to watch their sodium and sugar intake,” she said. “With the additional allotment, I can make better food choices for my children, and that helps a lot.”

Sears doesn’t work since all three of her children have health issues that need to be monitored. Her nine-year-old son had a stroke at birth, and suffers from cerebral palsy. Her 13-year-old daughter has severe scoliosis, and her youngest daughter, age four, has congenital heart disease.

Crystal, who participates in the Philadelphia-based Witness to Hunger program, monitors what is served at her children’s schools and advocates for the healthiest choices possible. She does the same for her children, saying that her vigilance lowers family medical costs.

She’s not the only one in her family who understands the benefit that an additional \$80 a month for food can provide. Crystal says her children love fresh fruit and adds that when they eat better, “they are like Eveready Bunnies.”