

Profile: County Food Stamps

(This is the sixth in a series of articles on the county social welfare system. Today's article discusses the food stamp program, attempting to give a profile of a "typical" food stamp recipient and answer a number of questions that frequently are asked concerning this controversial program.)

By Bob Ligon (and Horatio)

Drop by the county food stamp office on Emeline avenue in Santa Cruz just about any weekday and you're apt to see between 15 and 30 young people waiting to be interviewed.

Few, if any, older persons can be seen there.

Are these young people—mostly in their early 20's—typical food stamp recipients?

How many Valley residents are getting food stamps?

Can you work and still qualify for food stamps?

Can students get food stamps?

Why hasn't there been a single fraud prosecution of a food stamp recipient locally, even though scores of alleged violations have been checked on?

First off, there are two basic categories of persons receiving food stamps. One category receives food stamps as part of a welfare cash grant. In the majority of cases these are single parents—usually a mother—along with their children.

The other category of food stamp recipients are the ones we will discuss in this article. They receive food stamps only and do not also receive a welfare cash grant.

Of the 12,248 persons in the county getting food stamps, 5,047 of them fall into the second category—they are getting food stamps only.

It is these persons in the second category who are seen down at the food stamp office on Emeline avenue.

Mostly young adults, almost half of them, 2,289, are under the age of 23. Another 1,932 fall into the 23-30 age bracket.

Over the age of 30 the number of food stamp recipients drops off sharply. Only 821 persons 31 years or older receive food stamps.

In the San Lorenzo Valley there are a total of 992 food stamp "households." A household can either be an individual recipient or it can also include families of two or more people.

The number of households receiving food stamps in the city of Scotts Valley is 139.

Ben Lomond has 267; Boulder Creek 329; Felton 327; Brookdale 53; and Mount Hermon 16.

A person may be working or have other income and still be eligible for food stamps. What each recipient pays for his stamps varies depending on income.

For example, if a one-person household has a net income of \$100 a month, they would have to pay \$18 for the \$50 worth of stamps they receive.

With a net income of more than \$245 a month they would not qualify.

A family of eight making \$990 a month in net income would get \$298 in food stamps, but would have to pay \$258 for them.

A person or family can have up to \$1,500 in resources such as bank accounts and still qualify. Such things as your home or auto aren't considered as resources.

Many persons report zero net income and pay nothing for their stamps. How can someone report a zero income?

Some persons actually do live on virtually nothing. They live in tents or other makeshift shelters. They own few possessions. Their only major expense is food.

Others can report a zero net income because they are able to deduct large amounts for such expenses as medical bills or court ordered child support payments. Their expenses are nearly equal to their income.

Students qualify for food stamps as long as they meet the net income requirements and are not being declared as dependents by their parents for tax purposes. Records show that 522 students are getting food stamps, of which 66 have given zip codes indicating that they are residents at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

What about fraud in the food stamp program?

Violating the food stamp regulations can be either a misdemeanor or a felony depending on the amount of money involved. If more than \$200 is involved, it would be a felony, according to Carol White, with the district attorney's public fraud division.

She said no fraud cases have been prosecuted locally. One reason for this, she said, is that the amount of contested cases so far hasn't been more than \$200.

Each month is considered a separate total. For the most part, said Ms. White, cases have been settled by allowing persons to make restitution.

Persons wanting to find out if they qualify for food stamps can find out by calling the food stamp office at 425-2464.

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