Food stamps breed embarrassment, resentment

By BOB LEVY

The harassed mother, with two young and somewhat out-of-control children in tow, pushes her grocery cart up to the checkstand and mumbles to the clerk:

"This is a food stamp order."

Learning this, the checker separates the items that may be bought with the federally provided stamps from those that may not.

Then, both checker and customer brace themselves for the wisecrack — or the outright hostile comment — from the next customer in line, who does not use food stamps.

Sometimes such a remark is made and sometimes it isn't. But whether with a feeble attempt at humor or with plain old nastiness, enough non-stamp users openly express their bad feelings about the stamps that many who do use them are uncomfortable about them.

"There are some middle class — what should I call them? rednecks? — who really get upset (at the stamps)," a checker at the local Lucky Market said, "and they don't mind saying so right in front of the people. It's very embarrassing for me and it's also very embarrassing for a lot of these people — maybe they're just out of a job for a while and what are they supposed to do?"

A checker at another local market says one of the favorite cracks of a non-stamp user following close on the heels of a user is, "Can I pay for this (whatever it is being bought) with money?"

Subjected to abuse of this nature, it is not surprising that many food stamp users are as quiet as they can be when they tell the clerk stamps will be involved in the transaction; maybe the others in line won't notice.

There's really no hiding the fact, however, because the user is required to pull out the book of stamps and, in the presence of the clerk, rip out the ones needed for the purchase.

This requirement of the law makes the food stamp program — of necessity to millions across the country and thousands in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties — the only welfare program which forces its recipients to publicly identify themselves.

Regular welfare recipients, if they desire privacy, can cash their checks at a bank where only the teller knows it's a public assistance check. Not food stamp recipients; unless they find themselves alone in a store so that only the grocery clerk is aware of the situation, they must present the stamps for everyone to see.

"One of the great disadvantages of the program," Santa Cruz County welfare director David Singleton suggests, "is that it readily identifies the poor."

The ready identification, Singleton thinks, keeps a number of persons, especially those in the elderly category who may be eligible, from taking advantage of food stamps.

"You can't discount the pride factor," Singleton observes.

What you can discount with food stamps, though, is the cost of food. Depending on a household's income and the number of persons in it, anywhere from $10 to $178 worth of free food is available with the stamps each month.

A single person whose "adjusted monthly net income" is between $170 and $210 can purchase stamps for $36 that will buy $46 worth of food. Arriving at "adjusted monthly net income" involves a complex formula, the basics of which include deducting such items as medical expenses, tuition, alimony payments and rent.

At the other end of the scale, a household of five with an "adjusted" income of under $30 is eligible for stamps worth $178 in food at no charge.

Food stamps were introduced into Santa Cruz County about two years ago, replacing the old surplus food program. Recent figures show that about one county resident in 10 is helped by the food stamp program. In Los Angeles County, Singleton says, the figure is closer to one in seven. In Monterey County, on the other hand, it's more like one in 16.

Specifically, the figures show that in Santa Cruz County, 5,892 households representing 13,975 persons received food stamps in a recent month. These households spent $184,827 for the stamps, and bought $528,586 worth of food with them.

Figures like these are what supporters of the program point to when the critics start howling.

"Sometimes people tend to forget the poor are just a funnel for the assistance they receive," Singleton says. "They rarely put it in bank accounts; they put it right back in the economy."

John Andronico, manager of the Albertson's store in Freedom, thinks that with food stamps the government has "arrived at something pretty equitable."

"Food stamp business," he adds, "is good solid businesss. You don't have to worry about checks being returned, for example. It's as good as cash."

Food stamps do mean extra work for the grocery stores, but Andronico is one store official who believes it is "negligible and more than offset by the extra business."

A store official who doesn't feel that way is Walt Henry, a Safeway employe in Santa Cruz.

Stamps, Henry says, "are a hassle in the booth (the store's office). The paper they're made out of is much harder to count than money and stamps mean seven more denominations of paper we have to count and sort." The federal stamps come in denominations of $5, $2 and 50 cents and, since no one may receive cash in change, each chain prints its own stamps for that purpose in denominations of one, five, 10 and 25 cents.

Stamps, Henry thinks, mean "more man hours for us, and if we come up with an error at the end of the day, it'll probably be in the stamps."

But ultimately it seems to be the non-stamp-using customers who are most upset by the stamps — and the checkers who usually hear about their anger.

"Only the Mexicans get them; why can't I get them?" is a typical comment a Lucky clerk says she hears.

Or, in a store in Santa Cruz, where there are a number of long-haired student types using stamps, the standard bitter remark is, "I don't understand how these people can get stamps," according to a checker there.

(Checkers, because they regularly deal with the same customers on both sides of the issue, all asked not to be identified.)

One, while acknowledging she saw a need for the stamps, said she could also understand the resentment they breed. Older customers, in particular, like to point out how they made it through the Depression without "government handouts" like stamps; they can see no excuse for stamps going to the "young, very healthy and obviously employable people who come through," she says.

The bitterness of the old people is sometimes twofold. Not only do they recall the struggles of their youth, but some who would be willing to accept stamps now are ineligible.

By some strange logic in the regulations, when the federal government last Jan. 1 took over from the state the role of administering welfare aid to the elderly, it cut those receiving such aid off the food stamp are at or near the poverty level.

Thus, the only elderly persons now eligible for food stamps are those whose income is low enough to qualify for the stamps, but not so low that they can get direct welfare payments.

Of the 14,000 or so beneficiaries of stamps in a recent count, fewer than 3,000 fell into the elderly category. Yet there are some 20,000 to 30,000 residents of Santa Cruz County over the age of 65, and most of them are at or near the popverty level.

Viewed in this light, one checker's comment that "older people get madder than anybody at food stamps" is easier to understand.

Yet those "healthy, employable-looking" youths who zip through the supermarket lines—often with steaks and without the embarrassment of the food stamp families, checkers relate—are fully within the law.

While stamp recipients between the ages of 18 and 65 must register for work, mothers of children under the age of 18 are exempt from this requirement—so are students attending any school or legitimate training program on at least a half-time basis.

Furthermore, the regulations don't care whether such students' parents live in Beverly Hills or Watts; as long as the county's eligibility staff can determine the student is receiving no aid from his parents, the stamps are forthcoming.

Nor are the regulations interested in the relationship of persons—young or old—living together and applying for stamps as a single household. All that's required is that the group be living as "one economic unit sharing common cooking facilities." Communes are thus eligible, as are students sharing an apartment, and other similar arrangements.

Since the program began here a couple years ago, the stamps have been obtainable at the post office, where long lines of stamp buyers could be seen twice a month. As of Jan. 1, however, the post office is going out of the direct food stamp business, and they will be obtainable only through the mail from the Santa Cruz County welfare department.

For those not receiving actual welfare payments, this will mean obtaining a certified or cashier's check or money order to mail in each month to get the stamps. Those receiving the welfare payments will be able, within a couple of months after the first, to ask the department to deduct the cost of the stamps from the welfare check, and to send out the check and the stamps at the same time.

The largest category of welfare cash recipients involved in food stamps is the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). There are some 3,100 AFDC cases in Santa Cruz County. Strangely, only about 2,400 of them generally avail themselves of the stamps each month. And, Singleton says, that's high as counties go.

Why? The overriding reason, apparently, is that the welfare recipients don't want to tie up cash in something that can only be used for food.

This, naturally, is distressing to the welfare people, since the whole point of the food stamp program is to at least attempt to guarantee that people get enough to eat.

Towards this same end, many products that are necessities of life and are purchased in supermarkets—soap is the most obvious example—may not be purchased with food stamps. Besides soap and all paper goods, pet food, tobacco and alcohol are also off the food stamp list. Soda pop, though, is okay.

It is because there are these ineligible items that the customer is asked to inform the checker beforehand that a food stamp transaction is the offing. It is much easier to separate them during the checkout process than after it.

Only occasionally, most checkers say, will a food stamp customer try to sneak an ineligible item through on stamps.

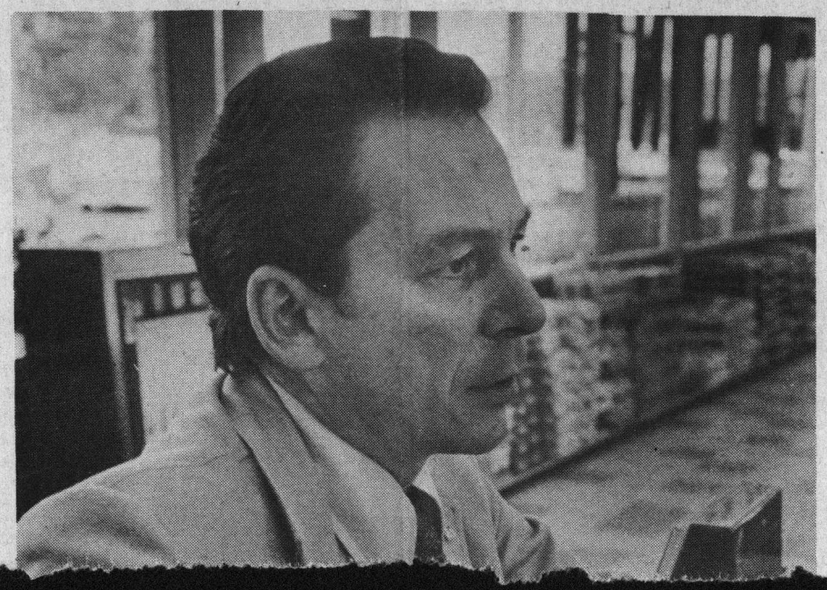
A more serious case of fraud came up recently when, investigators say, a clerk at a local market bought stamps worth $435 in food from an undercover agent for $130. If the seller had not been an agent, he would have had $130 in cash where he had only food purchasing-power previously. The clerk, on the other hand, has either bought himself $305 in free food—or has made his store that much money since the stamps are redeemable by markets for their face value in cash.

Singleton takes a philosophic view of such goings-on.

"I'd be foolish to say there weren't abuses," he says. "There are and they are going on all over the country."

He noted Gov. Ronald Reagan has called food stamps "a program ripe for abuses," and responds to this attitude with:

"Well, of course it is, with so many people involved. But there's no question it's a tremendous benefit to an awful lot of people by increasing their purchasing power."



off the pad

Odds and ends

By BILL AKERS

The State Department of Fish and Game take a back seat to no one when it comes to the use of euphemisms to obscure reality.

In a recent press release the DFG said that the "pheasant harvest" was up 71 per cent for the first nine days of the current season. It calculated that 4,721 cock pheasants were "taken" during that period. In one area—the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area—the "harvest" was double what it was last year.

What they are really talking about is killing birds, but what they want it to sound like is your basic, everyday gathering in of the sheaves.

Hunters do not shoot game for food. They do it because they enjoy shooting birds and animals. So in that sense, the killing of pheasants cannot be construed as a harvest. And, birds are not taken, they are killed.

So why doesn't the DFG come right out and say so?

are all things to be thankful for, of course.

Perhaps what we should be praying for is that we won't need to build any more freeways in the county.

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A letter from C.D. Wheelock, of Aptos, reminded me of a thoughtless omission on my part.

In a recent story, I wrote at great length about the UCSC library without once mentioning the man whose name it bears—Dean E. McHenry, the founding UCSC chancellor.

An inexcusable oversight, indeed, and my thanks to Prof. Wheelock for calling it to my attention.

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Far be it from me to bring down the wrath of liberated women down on anyone, but I think Capitola city manager Max Kludt really put his foot in his mouth.

At the council meeting Monday night Kludt, a good city manager, nice person and good provider for his family, made the

'Nutcracker' tickets on sale