

Food Stamps: Good Or Bad?

(Second of a three - part series)

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A battered car pulls up in front of the Post Office and a young girl with disheveled hair slides out of the front seat and goes into the office to collect her monthly allotment of food stamps. Outside, her three companions and several ragamuffin children wait in the car.

The transaction is short and as she joins her companions, the clerk at the post office looks after her.

"They've been coming here ever since the program started — first of the month on the dot.

"They live in a commune up in the hills and as far as I can see, they don't do anything. They are young and strong. They ought to be out earning a living."

The complaint, voiced by

others in the Santa Cruz area, typifies some of the reactions to the nation's growing food stamp program.

Conceived in 1961, the project has mushroomed into an expanding program which is expected to feed 14 million people this year — and as the program grows, so do the criticisms.

Suspected fraud, misuse of food stamp funds, the denial of food stamps to the elderly on Supplemental Security Income programs and suspected cases of cheating are among the most common complaints voiced by citizens, officials and merchants alike.

Yet, the program often provides welcome relief to those who unexpectedly lose their jobs, are disabled temporarily and others who just couldn't make it alone.

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Food Stamps: A Growing Program With Growing Criticism

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"They've saved my life," said Joyce Tauriac, mother of five children. "I don't know what I'd do without food stamps."

Tauriac receives \$144.50 in food stamps each month at a cost of \$42.50, but she said the stamps usually don't last the month.

"I don't eat high on the hog either," she said. "We have chicken, hamburger and a lot of beans. With this many kids, I don't know what I'd do without food stamps."

Tauriac said she tries to get off assistance every chance she gets and usually spends the canning season working nights in local canneries.

"I was humiliated when I first went on welfare. I had to stand in line with a lot of rag-taggle people. I thought 'I don't belong here. I feel like a beggar.' But when you've got kids, you have to sacrifice some of your pride."

"You don't know what it's like to be down and out," she said. "Food stamps have been a real blessing."

Cases like Tauriac's abound, yet criticisms continue.

One of the most frequently voiced complaints is that recipients are often young, hippie-types, who really don't need the aid.

"We've got a relatively youthful population on food stamps," said David Singleton, director of the county's Social Welfare Department. "But that is not unusual. This sort of thing is relatively common throughout the state — especially in the beach areas."

He also said there were many students on the program. However, if they qualify under the income and resources requirements, "it's all legal," he said.

Yet cases of hedging to meet requirements by students do exist.

One young college student said although he was receiving aid from his family, he was able to qualify for food stamps. He and his girlfriend declared themselves a household and by subtracting rent and both of their tuitions from his income, they were able to qualify for food stamps.

"I suppose we fudged a little," he said. He added that several of his friends did the same thing.



Food stamps are available at Post Offices

"It's easy to hide the money you get from home," he said.

"I won't deny there is some fraud, just like on income taxes," said Singleton. "We try to build in checks and balances to catch things."

Those cases that are uncovered, said Singleton, are sent to the District Attorney for prosecution.

"Out of the 6,000 cases in June, we had only 17 suspected instances of fraud. That's a pretty low number — and I think we catch most that do occur."

Singleton added that simplification of the program would reduce the incidence of fraud.

Currently, food stamp recipients who pay nothing for the coupons are recertified each month, said Dorothea Latta, chief of welfare, special programs. While other cases are certified every three to six months.

This is a large load on her 21 eligibility workers, who handle 200 to 250 cases per month. Latta said, however, as many as 600 cases are knocked from food stamp assistance each month.

In June, 795 cases were dropped from food stamp assistance, said Latta, while only 400 were added. However, according to a survey, the number of food stamp cases usually drops during the summer months.

The largest decline occurred in January, however, when the majority of senior citizens on the food stamp roles were dropped from the program due to a

new federal program called Supplemental Security Income (SSI) — thus the seeming absence of elderly receiving food stamps.

Under the new regulations, those over 65 who were on public assistance programs and receiving food stamps, were switched over to the SSI program, handled by the Social Security Office, and barred from receiving food stamps.

The SSI program, instituted in January 1974, provided for a maximum income of \$235 per month for a single person and \$440 per month for a couple.

However, an increase in the amount, bringing the totals to \$255 and \$460, were later added into the program to compensate for lost food stamp income.

This increase benefited seniors, according to Singleton, because it raised them above the amount they were getting on general assistance and food stamps combined. In addition, seniors were not participating in the food stamp program.

The non-participation was a result of several factors and is still going on for those who do not receive SSI payments and are eligible for food stamps.

"Personal pride is the biggest reason," said J. Frank Gallagher, director of project SCOUT (Senior Citizen's Outreach).

"Most of the older people have been trading with the same market or years," he said. "They feel ashamed when they have to pay the grocer they have known for so long with

food stamps."

He told of one 78-year-old man on the westside who refused any kind of government aid. "I prefer to eat less rather than get welfare," the man told Gallagher.

This type of pride is not unusual, he said.

Other drawbacks to the food stamp program for seniors are the complicated application forms for food stamps, problems of seniors getting to and from the post office to pick up the stamps and the long lines at the Post Office that force the elderly to stand for 30 minutes at a time, he said.

In a county with over 27,000 seniors, he said, only about five per cent took part in the program.

But the move to help the seniors by switching them to the SSI program and giving them the bonus "left seniors in a worse position now than they ever were," said Connie Kwefauver, office manager for Senior Citizen's Legal Services.

"In many cases the increase in SSI benefits didn't offset the value of the stamps," she said.

Currently, only five states, including California, don't allow seniors to receive food stamps with their SSI payments.

This is because federal regulations state that if the SSI payment was higher than welfare and food stamp payments combined, the state could decide whether or not to continue food stamps to SSI recipients.

A suit was brought against the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) to allow the elderly in California to receive food stamps plus SSI.

The case, however, resulted in a compromise measure that required HEW to give the seniors the increased payment, according to Robert Teets, attorney for the California Legislative Council for Older Americans who filed the case.

In addition, Teets said, Assemblyman William T. Bagley said he will sponsor legislation to give SSI recipients a cost of living raise. Hopefully, this will offset the loss of food stamps," said Teets.

Other abuses and inequities of the program have been pointed out by store owners and clerks.

"A lot of times food stamp recipients come to the expensive end of the counter," said one butcher in a small grocery store. "They buy nothing but the best — filet mignon, New York steak and T-bones, while the little old ladies stand at the other end of the counter buying chicken and hamburger."

Other butchers expressed the same complaint, while a clerk at another small market said, "I've seen a couple come in and buy \$20 worth of groceries with food stamps and then pay cash for \$20 worth of dog food."

"It just doesn't seem right that they get food stamps and can afford all that dog food," he added. This type of abuse is not rare, according to him.

Many clerks, store owners and customers told similar stories of food stamp recipients buying luxury items.

Rose Domenichelli, a clerk at Gregory's Service in Davenport, said "a lot of people come in and buy lunch meat, pop and whip cream with food stamps — certainly not staple items."

However, the owner of a market on the westside said he had not seen any abuse of the program.

Spiro Mellis, owner of Mellis Market on Mission Street, said, "There are some abuses, but I don't think it is the predominant thing."

"My only concern is whether or not the right people are using it."

He said only about three to five per cent of his business was with food stamps, but added, he knows of stores that have as

much as 25 per cent of their business in food stamps.

An additional complaint of both customers and clerks was the food stamp recipients failure to separate the items that could be purchased with food stamps and those which could not.

This results in checkers having to ring the sale twice and impatient customers.

Yet, on the other side of the abuses and complaints lies those people for whom food stamps are their only hope.

Families whose household head is disabled, mothers with small children to support, those who are unemployed and those who just hit a streak of hard luck.

"Maybe someday you'll have to be on food stamps," said

Tauriac. "Then you'll be able to understand the good the program does."

"I used to be ashamed when I went to the store and had to pay for my groceries with food stamps. But, I'm grateful for them now, they're the only way we can make it."

Tomorrow's article will be an analysis of the program — its strengths and its weaknesses.

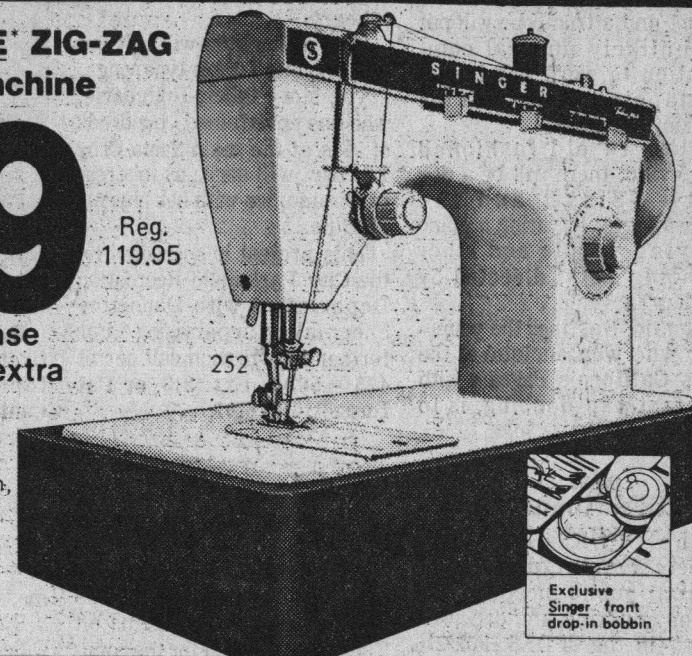
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