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## Hunger advocates: You try eating on \$3.50 a day

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ALBANY - In a bid to urge Congress to increase food stamp benefits, advocates yesterday challenged New Yorkers to spend \$3.50 - the average daily food stamp grant - on food for one day.

Food stamp regulations are tucked into the federal Farm Bill, which is up for reauthorization this year. But if the law is enacted in its current form, the value of the stamps will decline, making an already troubling situation even worse, the advocates said.

A failure to increase benefits would not only hurt the 1.8 million New Yorkers who rely on food stamps, an activist said, but would also resonate in local economies.

"These funds don't just put food on the table. They also provide vital support for food distributors, including local grocery stores, and for food producers," said Trudi Renwick, an economist with the Fiscal Policy Institute, an economic think-tank backed by labor unions.

The institute predicts the declining value of food stamps will cost the state \$211.6 million in economic activity next year, as every five dollars in benefits generates \$9.20 in local economic activity, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Nutrition Consortium of New York reported that every dollar in benefits saves taxpayers \$3.25 in health-care costs.

In 1996, Congress froze benefits as part of a welfare reform package. Before that, the amount was adjusted annually for inflation. If the federal government goes back to that system, Renwick said, benefits for an average household of three or fewer members, now at \$315 per month, would increase by \$24 a month.

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., has introduced an alternative to the Farm Bill that would index food-stamp benefits to inflation. A spokesman said it would result in a \$280 million increase in benefits for New Yorkers, though it wouldn't restore the erosion of benefits since 1996.

"It's common sense that the value of food stamps should keep pace with inflation," Schumer said. "Allowing benefits to wither away by doing nothing is bad policy that puts the most vulnerable among us unnecessarily in harm's way."

The advocates urged people to join in a national initiative to raise awareness about the issue by spending \$3.50 - the average daily benefit - on food for one day. That's \$1.16 per meal.

The governors of Oregon and Utah, along with several other officials, have both recently lived on the \$28 weekly average. This week, a New York City councilman, Eric Gioia of Queens, took the challenge and ran out of money early, forcing him to visit a food pantry.

"This is why by the third and fourth weeks of the month the soup kitchens and food pantries are literally bursting at

### Food stamp recipients in New York by county, 2006

#### County Total recipients Value

Dutchess	10,582	\$12,070,043
Putnam	95	\$978,977
Rockland	20,864	\$23,813,078
Westchester	39,640	\$46,931,921
New York state	1,788,833	\$2,281,071,170

Sources: Fiscal Policy Institute; state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

the seams," Gioia told NY1 News.

Renwick said four members of the House of Representatives have agreed to the challenge.

Those on food stamps are not only going hungry, but what they are eating is devoid of nutritional value, several advocates said.

"This inadequate aid affects not only the amount of food a family can buy, but also the types of purchases," said Bishop Howard Hubbard of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, quoting a New York Times editorial. "With too few dollars to spend, junk food becomes the best value because it is calorie-dense, cheap and imperishable."

About 35 million Americans, including almost 20 percent of them children, do not have access to nutritionally adequate food, the USDA said. In New York, about 775,000 households are "food insecure." The effects of this are wide-ranging and include poor health and increased hospitalization, lower school achievement and behavioral and emotional problems.

The advocates yesterday also called for increased accessibility to the food-stamp program. That includes restoring eligibility to all legal immigrants. Now, immigrants must wait five years for benefits, though their children are automatically eligible. They also want the monthly income limits for eligibility raised to at least \$5,000 because "households are forced to impoverish themselves before they can apply." Now, the limit is \$3,000 for the elderly or disabled and \$2,000 for everyone else.

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