

Bailing out the hungry

Editorial | 09/26/2008

With Wall Street teetering, there is plenty for us on Main Street to worry about. But there's also plenty we can do to help alleviate the most extreme conditions created by a weak economy.

The front page of Wednesday's Post-Dispatch reported that our region's food pantries are facing hard times. Demand has soared and continues to climb. The price of food has increased, in part because of the increased costs of transportation.

The food pantries' dilemma is symptomatic of a larger, fast-growing problem facing hundreds of thousands of Missouri and Illinois families.

Nine-hundred thousand Missourians now receive food stamp benefits. That means that one in every 6.4 state residents requires assistance meeting their basic food needs each month.

The rate of growth is shocking. In June 2003, about 620,000 Missourians participated in the program. In the five years since, enrollment in the state has jumped by more than 45 percent.

In Illinois, 1.2 million people get food stamp benefits, but that number has grown by only 16 percent since 2003.

More than 80 percent of those receiving benefits are families with children. Many are headed by working people whose jobs don't pay enough to pay for their families' groceries.

The food stamp program is an example of an efficient and effective federal initiative. As recently as the early 1960s, before the current program was inaugurated in 1964, malnutrition still was causing disease and, in some cases, early death among children in the United States.

The program keeps people from going hungry, but at today's prices, the reality is that today's benefit — about 84 cents per person per meal — does not provide adequate nutrition to families who need help putting food on the table.

Rising food prices — up 4.9 percent in 2007 and 7.5 percent in the first eight months of 2008 — affect everyone. And those receiving food stamps are hit even harder. Here's why:

Food stamp benefits are based on the cost of what's called the "Thrifty Food Plan" — an assortment of food that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has determined provides a nutritionally adequate and balanced diet at the lowest cost.

But the amount of the benefit is based on what that menu costs each June prior to the start of the federal budget year. In other words, the benefit always lags behind the actual cost of the bare nutritional minimum. In periods of rising prices, that lag causes genuine hardship, which generates increased requests for help from food pantries.

While Congress debates a \$700 billion Wall Street bailout, there's an effort afoot to enact a modest stimulus package aimed at ordinary people facing hard times.

"Substantial numbers of working Americans and their children are helped by food stamps every year," U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, who heads the House Hunger Caucus, told us. "If the Congress considers another stimulus bill this year, the food stamp program should be bolstered so it can continue to help Americans suffering through challenging times."

One element under discussion is a modest, temporary (six- to nine-month) bump in the amount of food stamp benefits. If everyone in the food stamp program nationwide received a 20 percent increase for six months, it would cost about \$3 billion.

One thing, however, would make an immediate difference in our own community: contributions of food and cash to replenish area food pantries.

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