



On December 1, 2011, the [Community Food Bank](#) of New Jersey issued a [challenge](#) to New Jersey residents, asking them to “live on the average food stamp budget for one week (\$31.50) and share their experience.” As Commissioner of the Department of Human Services, the state agency that administers the [NJ SNAP](#) program, I felt it was important for me to take part.

As quoted in the press release announcing my participation:

“I’ve accepted this challenge recognizing that my week of participation in no way compares to the difficulties people who are food-insecure face in the long-term, but I congratulate the Community Food Bank of NJ for developing a ‘walk the talk’ awareness campaign. I know this initiative will prove challenging, but it also will serve as a valuable point of reference in my work as Commissioner. With an estimated 1 million residents who are not enrolled in NJ SNAP and are food insecure, it’s important that we raise awareness of this important program so that these individuals and families have access to three meals a day. They depend upon a patchwork of resources, including family members, churches, and our communities’ food pantries or soup kitchens for food assistance.”

NJ SNAP is a federally funded, state administered, food assistance program that provides electronic benefits on debit-like cards for individuals and families who meet the income criteria. In April 2010, New Jersey expanded the program from 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (at or less than \$14,157 for an individual or at or less than \$29,055 for a family of 4) to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$20,147 for an individual or \$41,348 for a family of 4). The average monthly benefit for a NJ SNAP *household* is about \$273.

My observations begin with a shopping trip...

Sunday, December 4, 2011- Grocery shopping:

This was not a simple shopping trip. I really had to pay close attention to the brands and price per unit for certain items. I consider myself a pretty astute shopper, usually; I clip coupons and take advantage of 2 for 1 offers. In this case, though, I had to put back a couple of items that I simply couldn't afford. Instead of getting the 12oz hummus, I got the 8oz, which likely won't last the week for sandwiches. I realized that buying in greater quantity for a cheaper overall price is not possible. Even though the unit price would have been less, I just didn't have the cash available to buy more. My grocery purchases are below.



Monday, December 5, 2011 - Day 1:

This morning I had a pre-scheduled March of Dimes breakfast that I attended. The cost of the event was \$21.95. I had fruit. Since the event was pre-paid, I'm reluctant to count it in this challenge. But I am keenly aware that people who are food insecure don't have the luxury of a pre-paid breakfast event. I'm also very mindful that the amount of food available on a daily basis in our office building puts me at a very unfair advantage. DHS staff regularly brings in homemade treats. We also pay monthly into a water cooler and coffee fund. On to Day 2...

Tuesday, December 6, 2011 - Day 2 - What's the point?

Today was very busy so having prepared meals was actually helpful. Breakfast was eaten in the car on the way to a service event at HomeFront's Free Store on Division Street in Trenton. I had apple slices and coffee. Lunch also was on the run - hummus sandwich and water. Since I announced my participation in the Food Stamp Challenge, press as well as friends and family are asking me what I hope to accomplish; what's the take-away? I think any PR campaign that raises awareness about the prevalence of food insecurity is important. When I was younger, my family used Food Stamps so I'm personally familiar. I hope that my participation in the challenge raises awareness about the state programs available to people who are food insecure. NJ WIC for women with infants and children up to age 5, NJ SNAP and www.EndHungerNJ.com for local food resources by county.

Wednesday, December 7, 2011 - Day 3 - The Safety Net

We know from this Food Stamp challenge and stories all over the news that the number of people who are food insecure in NJ and across the country is growing. This means that they lack the money for 3 meals a day. Today, I volunteered at the new Interfaith Food Pantry in Morris County. The staff there reinforced the message we all know: There is no 'face' of hunger. It can be our neighbor, co-worker, or a family member.

This Food Pantry and others around the state are part of an essential safety net. On Monday, and a few occasions since, there were times that food was available to me at no cost. Whether because a colleague brought bagels in the morning or it was someone's birthday celebration, it was good to know that I had options outside of the \$31.50 in food I was able to purchase for the week. Obviously a person can't count on free food at a special event to stretch their food dollar, but they can depend on the community-based infrastructure that exists for this purpose.

There are Food Pantries that provide non-perishables such as soups, rice, pasta and cereal. There are Soup Kitchens that serve hot lunches and dinners. There are Faith-based groups that arrange food-sharing networks among families in need. This challenge has shown me that the safety net is essential and wouldn't be possible without the dedication of our community partners and the donations from businesses and residents throughout the state that keep these agencies in service - not just during the holidays, but year round.

Thursday, December 8, 2011 - Hunger

I'm hungry. I realized that I'm hungry a lot. I'm not sure if it's psychological or if I really need more food. I'm normally not a big eater. I lightly graze throughout the day, mostly because I'm often in meetings or at events. The foods I bought for this challenge are the foods I eat daily. I'm vegetarian so the fruits, hummus, bread, milk, granola - it's all part of the diet. The adjustment was in how much and what brands I bought, but I was confident that it would be equivalent to my usual intake. This week, though, I have been hungry. Part of it may be a sympathetic reaction to what this challenge represents. I also think that human nature makes you want what you can't have. Or, maybe it's because I've been very disciplined about sticking to the 'rules' - not eating anything I haven't bought with my \$31.50 weekly NJ SNAP benefit, except as provided in a cost-free way. Regardless of the reason, the stomach grumblings help keep me focused on the purpose - to raise awareness about the estimated 2 million NJ residents who are food insecure and the state or community support available to them.

Friday, December 9, 2011 - Sustainability

There has been a lot of interest in my participation in the Food Stamp Challenge that has in many ways surprised me. At events, at work, even among my family, I've been asked why I was motivated to get involved and if by being involved, it will make a difference. For me, it's an opportunity to connect with some of the families served by this Department. And, it has been a unique opportunity to

promote state programs and services that support individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity.

During the holiday season, especially, people and the press focus a lot on families that are struggling. But often times, the attention doesn't last. For a couple of months out of the year, community-based social service agencies are pleasantly overwhelmed by the donations and volunteers. And then, sometime around late January or early February, the interest wanes. People resume their busy lives. But the need doesn't go away.

What I'm doing this week with the Challenge is everyday life for many, many families. The faltering economy has forced a new population of people to seek government and community services. Unexpected medical expenses, sudden unemployment, retirement funds lost in the stock market, foreclosure, divorce or death of a spouse...these factors all can contribute to a family's need for assistance. These situations occur throughout the year - not just in November and December.

I'm hopeful that this Challenge and the various other awareness campaigns going on right now will inspire a sustained interest in support programs. Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Saturday, December 10, 2011 - Day 6 - Choices...

I admit the weekend makes this Food Stamp Challenge even more...challenging. At work, there is little time amidst the meetings, phone calls and paperwork to think about being hungry. It always seems that just as I bite into a sandwich, a colleague walks in with something that requires immediate attention. For the purposes of this initiative, being busy served me well.

At home, the lack of structure in the day makes this more difficult. It doesn't help that my \$31.50 worth of groceries are in the refrigerator next to my family's food - on the shelves with the cheese (I love cheese!) and orange juice, veggies with dip...and CHEESE! These are items I enjoy but couldn't afford with my weekly Food Stamp benefit. I resisted temptation, knowing that the challenge ends tomorrow; but it highlighted for me another factor families face on food assistance: Every week they have to make smart choices in food selection that maximize the food budget, rather than indulging personal cravings.

The NJ SNAP program provides a monthly benefit to eligible individuals and families. The average per household subsidy is \$273. This is for unprepared food products, only. The staples: toilet paper, paper towels, laundry detergent, soap, light bulbs, etc. are not allowable expenses (the Electronic Benefit Transfer card recognizes and pays for only products with certain barcodes). So, SNAP families have to be vigilant when comparing costs, choosing brands, limiting serving sizes and planning meals, in order for the benefit to last all month.

Sunday, December 11, 2011 - Day Seven - The take-away...

It was a tough week. Not just because of the Food Stamp Challenge but because it was busy and stressful and nearing the holiday, which creates a whole different kind of chaos. And what I realized, in addition to the other difficulties I wrote about this week, is that hunger affects everything: energy, patience, mood and sleep.

So, what's the take-away?

First, I want to thank the Community Food Bank of NJ for initiating this Challenge and humanizing the subject of food insecurity in a way that engaged and inspired people.

New Jersey's hunger safety net - maintained by several state agencies - has been stretched these last few years with a growing population seeking government assistance. Our collective programs' enrollment increases make this point indisputable. These services are enhanced by a community infrastructure that includes: the state's Food Banks; Food Pantries; Soup Kitchens; Community and Faith-Based organizations, with the support of corporate or personal donations, and the generosity of dedicated volunteers.

There is no single or simple solution - at least not yet - to eradicate food insecurity. But, there are resources available. And, this is the message I hope is conveyed through the Food Stamp Challenge. As much as there may be debate about the adequacy of assistance, it's important to direct individuals or families in need to the following support programs:

1. NJ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([SNAP](#)) - food subsidy for income eligible individuals and families
2. www.endhungernj.org - an online, comprehensive resource of community-based organizations serving food insecure individuals and families
3. Women, Infants and Children Program ([WIC](#)) - nutritional food subsidy for income eligible women with children up to age 5
4. Free and Reduced School [Breakfast](#) and [Lunch](#) Program - provides nutritious, well-balanced breakfasts and lunches for children to promote sound eating habits, to foster good health and academic achievement and to reinforce the nutrition education taught in the classroom

During this holiday season and beyond, there are service agencies in need of volunteers to advance their missions. There are opportunities available to adults, youth, school, neighborhood and civic groups. The Governor's Office of Volunteerism has developed a [service directory](#) of volunteer opportunities and the latest information about trends and best practices that enhance New Jersey's communities through service.

Best wishes to everyone for safe and healthy holiday and New Year.