

Improving SNAP, Improving Lives: The Case For Healthier Food Stamps

The city's social services commissioner makes the case for prohibiting the use of food stamp benefits to buy sugary drinks.

By Robert Doar

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America's food stamp program, currently called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is one of our nation's proudest achievements. It provides assistance to millions of struggling families by helping them put food on their tables during difficult times. Every day, the program helps seniors on fixed incomes, working families, and people facing hardships due to unemployment or disability. During the recent economic downturn as our economy struggles to get back on its feet, the program has responded like no other social safety net – expanding by more than 38 percent in New York City, to 1.7 million people.

But the program is not perfect. In fact, it has a serious flaw: Food stamps can still be used to buy soda and sugar-sweetened drinks, products which provide no nutritional value, and are actually a leading cause of the obesity and diabetes epidemics. That's why New York State has submitted a proposal to the USDA which would prohibit the use of food stamps to buy these products on a two-year trial basis. Benefits would not be reduced by a penny, and people could still use their own money to buy whatever they want.

The program's primary goal has always been to supplement a household's income with nutritious foods. So it just doesn't make any sense for government to subsidize the purchase of the products that contribute most to the growing epidemics of obesity and diabetes, both of which are much more prevalent in low-income neighborhoods. It's also sending a mixed message to the millions of people who rely on food stamps to meet their nutritional needs. On one hand, government is educating and encouraging people to live healthier and watch their diets. Yet on the other, it's contributing to the very habits that lead people to suffer from serious health consequences.

Our proposal is really about offering the maximum assistance to those who depend upon food stamps. Today, approximately 6 percent of food stamp purchases across the nation go to soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages defined by the USDA as having "minimal nutritious value." In New York City, that's somewhere between \$75 and \$135 million a year—a lot of money for products that do nothing to help the program meet its goal of improving nutrition for those in need.

If the USDA approves this measure, the benefits now being spent on soda and sugar drinks would instead go towards the purchase of healthier foods and drinks that provide actual nutrition. That means more assistance, and fewer preventable health problems, for low-income New Yorkers.

More than half of adults in New York City are overweight or obese, and diabetes causes more than 22,300 hospitalizations annually. A full 46 percent of those hospitalized live in low-income neighborhoods. As startling as the number of New Yorkers with diabetes and obesity-related illnesses is, so is the price tag for taxpayers. Obesity-related illnesses cost New York State residents nearly \$8 billion in medical costs each year through public programs like Medicaid and Medicare.

A common argument against this proposal is that it would stigmatize food stamp recipients and discourage participation. But food stamps already can't be used to purchase certain products, including beer, wine, liquor, hot prepared foods, and cigarettes. These exceptions have not discouraged people from enrolling in the program, and the use of the Electronic Benefits card (EBT) has made purchasing products with food stamps much easier and more seamless for recipients and retailers.

Some people have also voiced concern about how this would affect retailers around the city. But food stamp benefits will not be reduced, and people will continue to spend those benefits in the same places they always have – they'll just be spending them on other products. Certainly there will be an adjustment period as stores and consumers become accustomed to this change. But from bodegas to supermarkets to the pharmacy down the street, retailers will adjust.

This initiative is another logical step in the city's comprehensive approach to increase access to healthy foods in the neighborhoods where they've traditionally been hard to find. These efforts include the Health Bucks program, which provides a financial incentive for food stamp beneficiaries to purchase fruits and vegetables in farmers markets, the Green Carts and Healthy Bodegas programs, which aim to increase access and supply to nutritious foods in low-income neighborhoods, and an education program through New York State's Eat Smart New York, which helps thousands of people every year make healthier food choices.

So let's give this proposal a try. By eliminating the purchase of soda with food stamps, we can improve the health of families. And that's something all New Yorkers can stand behind.