

New York City and State Propose Excluding Sodas from Food Stamp Purchases

On Thursday, October 7, Mayor Bloomberg and Governor Paterson unveiled a proposal submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to remove sodas and other sugar-sweetened drinks from the list of items which can be bought with Food Stamps in New York. Sugar-sweetened drinks contribute to the nation's obesity and diabetes epidemics, and subsidizing their purchase through Food Stamps contradicts the mission of the Food Stamp program: to help low-income families afford healthy and nutritious food. At the federal level, the program is now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Under the proposed initiative, Food Stamp recipients would still get the same amount of benefits each month, but they would not be able to use those benefits to buy sodas or other sugar-sweetened drinks for two years.

"In spite of the great gains we've made over the past eight years in making our communities healthier, there are still two areas where we're losing ground – obesity and diabetes," said Mayor Bloomberg. "New York City has already implemented a series of programs that bring fresh fruits and vegetables to the communities that need them and set nutrition standards for all meals and snacks the City provides. We have to continue developing new strategies and initiatives to complement what has already been done. And that's why we are looking to eliminate sugary beverages from allowable food stamp purchases. This initiative will give New York families more money to spend on foods and drinks that provide real nourishment."

"We are helping record numbers of low-income families put food on the table, and we are very proud of that accomplishment. But there is clear evidence that low-income individuals have higher rates of obesity and are more at risk of becoming obese than other groups," said Governor Paterson. "The serious chronic illnesses related to obesity – diabetes, cancer and heart disease – take a toll on our family, friends and neighbors, but also carry a cost that we all bear, as nearly half of the \$147 billion spent nationally on treatment per year is paid by Medicaid and Medicare."

"The food stamp program is one of our nation's great achievements, but it can always be improved," said Commissioner Robert Doar. "By excluding unhealthy, sugary drinks from the list of items allowed to be purchased with food stamp benefits, the program will come closer to meeting its goal of being a nutritional assistance program. Government should not be in the business of subsidizing poor health habits that end up costing taxpayers through higher Medicaid and Medicare costs."

New Yorkers with the lowest income are more likely than anyone else in the city to consume at least one sugar-sweetened drink per day – more than twice as likely as New Yorkers with the highest income. Lower-income New Yorkers are also twice as likely to suffer from obesity. A single 20 ounce soda contains the equivalent of 16 packets of sugar, and sodas are full of empty calories that are one of the leading causes of obesity, which can lead to further serious health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

Unhealthy items like alcohol and tobacco already cannot be purchased with Food Stamps. The proposed initiative would add sodas and other sugar-sweetened drinks to this list for two years, to give the City an opportunity to test the program's effectiveness. The USDA has already labeled sugar-sweetened

beverages as ‘foods of minimal nutritional value,’ The School Lunch and School Breakfast programs don’t include sugar-sweetened drinks, and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides additional nutrition assistance to children and pregnant women, does not allow sugar-sweetened drinks to be purchased with WIC benefits.

Obesity related illnesses are also a serious drain on the City and State’s taxpayers. Treating these illnesses costs New York State residents \$8 billion each year, or \$770 per household. Over half of New York City adults (57 percent) are overweight; over 22,300 people are hospitalized for diabetes in the City each year – nearly half of them from low-income neighborhoods – and heart disease is the number one killer in New York.

If the proposal is approved, it will be part of a comprehensive approach to encourage greater nutrition in New York City. The City’s efforts already include programs like Health Bucks, which provides Food Stamp clients with extra benefits when they buy fresh fruit and vegetables at farmers’ markets; the New York State Eat Smart New York nutrition education program; the Green Carts program, which has placed over 450 produce carts in New York’s poorest neighborhoods where fresh produce is less available; the Healthy Bodegas and Stellar Farmers Markets programs, which educate store owners and low-income families on the best ways to store and prepare fruits and vegetables; and the strict nutrition standards which the City has adopted for all publically financed meals, including snacks served in schools and day care centers. The proposed changes to the Food Stamp program would be rigorously evaluated to ensure that it is helping New Yorkers in the fight against obesity.