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Use and Misuse of the Food Stamp Program

“Welfare’s purpose should be to eliminate, as far as possible, the need for its own existence.” This quote was spoken by the former President Ronald Reagan. Food stamps are a form of welfare, and my question is whether or not the Food Stamp program conforms to this statement.

What I already know and don’t know

I know that food stamp benefits are misused. I worked at the local grocery store in my hometown of Pella for four years during high school. As a checker at the cash register, I dealt with all different types of payments, one method being food stamps. Any food item could be bought with food stamps, regardless of its nutritional value. Laundry detergent and other such non-food items could not be paid for by the food stamp card, as well as alcohol and tobacco items. I also know that each week when I receive my paycheck a decent amount of my pay goes straight to taxes. Part of those taxes pay for food stamp benefits for eligible low-income citizens.

What I don’t know is why I am paying these taxes when all too often I witness people misusing their food stamp benefits. I don’t know what makes someone eligible to receive food stamp benefits. I also don’t know how the government attempts to prevent food stamp misuse. I would like to know what could be done in instances where I have seen improper use of these benefits.

Why I want to understand my topic

I realize that the majority of the people who receive food stamp benefits indeed need the assistance, and I will pay some taxes to help those people make ends meet in their lives. It is other circumstances that are very unsettling to me. As a grocery store employee, what bothered me the most was when customers paid for all their food items with their food stamp card and yet were still able to purchase alcohol and tobacco items with pocket cash. Often times, the separate payment made for the purchase of alcohol and tobacco would be close to, or even exceeding that of the total dollar amount of food purchased.

In my mind, it is extremely illogical for my tax dollars to be paying for someone else's food who has enough money to buy his or her own food but chooses to irresponsibly use that money for an expensive bottle of rum and a carton of cigarettes. When I think of it that way, my tax dollars are essentially paying for another drunken night for some low-life across town who cannot work a sufficient job because of the irresponsible life decisions he or she has made. Yes, I am being blunt but that is what angers me.

I clearly remember one specific day working at Fareway. A lady in her early twenties came through my register line with a cart full of groceries. She had around thirty dollars' worth of groceries that she paid for with her EBT (food stamp) card. After that transaction was processed, she asked me for a carton of cigarettes. This particular brand of cigarettes was nearly fifty dollars per carton. She rummaged through some crinkled bills in her pocket coming just short of fifty dollars. She counted out some pocket change to reach the total.

During these five minutes of waiting for this customer to come up with enough cash to pay for these cigarettes, I impatiently stood there biting my tongue. I so badly wanted to interrogate this lady as to why she could not use her cash to pay for her own food instead of this

unnecessary carton of cigarettes. Knowing myself all too well, I knew I had better keep my mouth shut because dealing with this lousy customer would not be worth losing my job over.

I want to understand what qualified this young lady for food stamps. What regulations must be met for someone to receive food stamp benefits? How does the government know that people are using food stamps appropriately? I not only want to understand that, but also how the government could issue food stamps more efficiently, and how the government could avoid the misuse of food stamps. I am curious to find out what could be done to verify that people actually need the financial assistance.

Story of my Search

To begin my research on the topic of food stamps, I began with some general research. I knew the first step would be to pinpoint what exactly food stamps are and how they are regulated. From the official SNAP Food Stamp website, I found that the United States government uses two primary programs to assist low income citizens. The first is the Food Stamp Program and the second is WIC (Food Stamps). The main difference is that the Food Stamp Program assists low income families in general compared to WIC which specifically helps families of pregnant and nursing women.

The Food Stamp program was established in 1939. In the beginning, the program provided actual stamps or coupons that could be used to purchase food items. Recently, as of October 1, 2008 the program was officially renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. The purpose of the program remained the same: “to assist low-income families and individuals... directed at trimming back hunger and providing food and sustenance to people across the country” (Food Stamps).

Eligibility into the SNAP program depends on family size, income, and assets according to the official SNAP website. Eligibility is not determined by one certain number, but rather by a combination of different factors that the state then reviews with individual families. Participants must apply and be accepted into the program. Most applications can be completed at any local state-run office. The process also consists of an interview, as well as an ongoing agreement to follow all regulations throughout the entire use of the program (Food Stamps). Regulations vary from state to state; however, eligibility is relatively similar across the country.

The United States Department of Agriculture switched from paper coupons to Electronic Benefit Transfer, or EBT, cards when the program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Electronic Benefit). The government distributes taxpayer dollars monthly onto these cards. The primary benefit of using electronic filling is that fraud is more easily detected (Electronic Benefit). Purchases are much easier to monitor because everything is electronically processed.

The government's second form of assisting low income families with food is the WIC program. WIC stands for Women, Infant, and Children. WIC comes in the form of checks with specific instructions of what can be redeemed. Options primarily include bread, cheese, milk, fruits, and vegetables. Instructions are specific to nutritional value as well as brand name items. WIC is intended for pregnant and lactating low-income women and their children. WIC is only provided to a woman for up to six months after the birth of her child (Food Stamps). While WIC is not my primary topic of this research paper, I see some valuable ideas in the method in which WIC is operated compared to SNAP.

After learning exactly what each program is, I think WIC is better regulated. Although the SNAP program seems more technologically advanced with its use of EBT cards, WIC's use

of checks allows better regulation. The program is supposedly designed to supply nutritional food. When using the EBT card, any non-taxed food item can be purchased regardless of nutritional value, which defeats the purpose of providing nutrition. Perhaps the SNAP program should investigate ways to specifically regulate what food items can be bought similar to that of the WIC program. Staple items such as bread, milk, and eggs are necessary items, but a box of cookies on the other hand is not.

I interviewed a former sixth grade teacher of mine named Jocelyn Meinders. She has always been a regular customer at our local Fareway grocery store where I have worked for four years. After having her second child, she quit her job at the middle school in order to cater to the needs of her children. This was a hard decision for her and her family because they knew this would result in a financial strain for their family, but they feel that this decision was best for their children (Meinders).

Mrs. Meinders filed for food assistance through the WIC program. She was accepted for some assistance and receives checks every month for staple items such as milk, bread, eggs, cheese, and other items. I asked her if she felt this was an appropriate use of assistance for her family, she replied, “yes, it is more valuable to me that I personally care for my children rather than them sit in day care all day every day. Even though this choice results in needing financial help, statistics show that children’s growth is better stimulated by nourishment from their own parents. And that’s what is most important to me.” Mrs. Meinders has always been a respectable woman in my mind, and I have no doubt she utilizes this program legitimately. Similarly to this case, I recognize that the majority of food stamp users would never misuse their benefits.

In January of 2012 I was assigned by my government teacher to write a letter to congress. We could choose any topic to write on and who to write it to. I chose to write a letter to Senator

Chuck Grassley on the topic of food stamp misuse. After a few months I received a letter back. The letter assured me that the government is aware of these issues and is continuously doing its best to reform the system with the intentions of avoiding such misuse (Grassley). The letter directed me to a few sources such as the United States Department of Agriculture that deals more directly with the food stamp program. I then used these sources to learn of the eligibility of food stamp users.

My next few sources consist of various articles I found on online databases. I made sure to keep my sources up to date since this topic relies on recent facts and statistics. The first article that stuck out to me was one by Matthew Porter who wrote it while attending Syracuse University (Porter). He discusses food stamp abuse from numerous perspectives.

According to Porter's statistics, around fifteen percent of all citizens of the United States use food stamps. This rate seems to be growing consistently with the national population growth rate (Porter). This means that more and more people need food stamps, and with an increase in food stamps use comes an increase in abuse. It is estimated that an average of \$200,000 is lost each week as a result of food stamp abuse. Shockingly, this is only about five percent of the annual budget of the Food Stamp program (Porter). My question then is, how significant is that five percent compared to the overall expenses?

Porter shares the story of a man named Kenny Suressi within this article. Suressi knows firsthand what it is like to live on food stamps. He is an excellent example of the proper use of food stamps. He would receive \$200 at the start of each month which he would take and go stock up on around \$65 dollars of meat to keep frozen throughout the month. The rest of the money would be used for other staple items as needed. Suressi states, "most people can get by on food

stamps if they know how to eat...they were a blessing for me, I didn't have to worry about where my next meal was going to come from" (Porter).

Suressi has also witnessed the misuse of food stamps. He knew of people who would sell their food stamps for cash. Actually, Suressi used to be a cocaine dealer and he himself participated in such schemes. Suressi has completely turned his life around. He is no longer a dealer, and although he still does not have a full-time job, he spends his time volunteering at a food pantry (Porter).

Suressi admits that most of his friends who also live on food stamps would never risk their food stamp eligibility by using them illegally. Even though he is on the user side of the food stamp issue, he acknowledges that taxpayers should be upset with the abuse. He says, "it outrages me too. It's one bad apple that's trying to make the bushel rotten" (Porter).

This quote hits the heart of the issue. The Food Stamp program is designed to assist citizens who cannot make it themselves. The government does its best to enforce the fact that welfare recipients must be actively seeking work. Yet that does not cover up the fact that food stamp benefits are handed out with nothing in return. Essentially, the Food Stamp program is absolutely free to its users, which is why abuse at any scale is a big deal.

Another intriguing source I found was an article written by Kristin Volk. She discusses food stamp fraud in depth. She found that one of the fastest growing federal programs is the Food Stamp program, but it also has the highest rates of abuse (Volk).

The Food Stamp program is run by the United States Department of Agriculture. The USDA notes that by switching from paper coupons to Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, fraud rates have dropped significantly. The USDA is aware that food stamps are abused all too frequently, but it is working towards ways to cut abuse. One primary means of cracking down on

Food Stamp abuse is monitoring the stores that accept food stamps closely. By strictly regulating authorized grocery stores, food stamp abuse is restricted (Volk).

Another article that was helpful with my research was one written by Sam Hananel. He investigated the varying regulations of food stamps across the United States. Wyoming, Idaho, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Alabama are among the states with the smallest amount of food stamp use (Hananel). Interestingly, these states are among the states with the strictest regulations. Warning letters are written every time someone's EBT card is reported "lost." These letters let users know that they are being closely monitored (Hananel). The idea is that liars will be easily detected with some threat, along with the fact that new cards are not handed out without proper investigation. Valuable advice should be taken from these states.

Another useful source I found was a book titled "So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?" The book shares stories of welfare recipients' perspectives of the welfare system. Welfare recipients are used to being called "lazy, unmotivated, worthless" and other such derogatory words. The general response to these remarks is that welfare recipients themselves have many complaints about the welfare system.

A huge weakness of the welfare system that was repeatedly emphasized is that welfare benefits are significantly reduced or eliminated prematurely when a recipient acquires a job. Most people who leave welfare get only low-wage work, and they remain very vulnerable... with their cash grant, food stamps, housing subsidies, and Medicaid cut, they are in worse financial predicament than they were while they were at home receiving welfare. Is it worth it, they ask themselves? (Seccombe 152)

It is not easy for welfare recipients to get off of welfare and stay off. Perhaps this implies what the next step the government should take to improve the system should be. Programs such as food stamps should not immediately stop after someone receives a job.

The average person who finds a job after being on welfare typically does not find anything more than a minimum wage paying job. Studies have been done that prove people cannot survive on the minimum wage salary today in America. Terminating food stamp benefits once the recipient finds a job is not the answer. More than likely, statistics show that this people will find themselves needing welfare again after a short time (Seccombe 159). Food stamp benefits should be extended long enough to assist people to get on their feet and stay there.

What I learned

At the conclusion of this study, I felt much more educated on the topic of food stamps. I learned that the Food Stamp program was designed over a century ago to better this nation by assisting low-income citizens. The intentions of this program are essential to maintaining a respectable standard of living in the United States of America.

I learned of a few steps the government should take in bettering the Food Stamp program. First of all, I think the program should specify what items can be purchased with food stamps. Nutritious staple items should be the purpose of food stamps, not junk food, candy bars, and pop. Secondly, eligibility for the program needs to change. All recipients of food stamps should be closely monitored in order to catch instances of fraud within the program.

I heard a few stories of food stamp recipients who use their food stamp benefits respectively and admit that the program helps them meet ends in their life. On the other hand, I learned of many instances where people find that their food stamp benefits fall short of fulfilling

their needs. And as far as abuse goes, it only takes a small amount of fraud to ruin the name of the program for everyone.

In my opinion, I do not think that the Food Stamp program works to eliminate its own existence. Taxpayers want to see their tax dollars at work in a positive, non-abusive way. Even the recipients themselves want reforms to be made to the program. Citizens on both ends of the spectrum want to see changes. Requests have been made, opinions have been shared, so now it is the United States government's turn to represent their citizens by enforcing such reforms.

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