

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

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The Faces of Food Stamps



Marvin George holds a picture of himself as a child and his mother as he sits in his apartment at the New Beginnings Fox Run Apartments.

Stories by Amy Bickel and Kathy Hanks. Photos by Sandra Milburn, Travis Morisse and Lindsay Bauman

Marvin George just wants a job.

He sits on the worn orange couch in his low-income apartment –most of his belongings are in storage. His walls are bare except for a black-and-white photo of him as a toddler that hangs above his head.

Back then, he had no worries, he says quietly. But these days, as he talks about his life from his small, one-room residence, worry etches his 55-year-old face.

"A year from now I'll probably be looking for a bridge to put my address on," he says. "My 401K won't last that long."

His \$25,000 in retirement is what George has been living on for the past three years – that and the food stamps he receives. But even that assistance has been cut from \$200 to just \$18 a month as he continues to search for work – sometimes putting

out as many as five job applications a day.

With little schooling, limited computer skills and an age that is creeping toward retirement, no one wants him.

There are 47 million Americans on food stamps. George is one of them. ***

On a recent Tuesday, Rep. Tim Huelskamp stood in front of a meeting room at Lyons State Bank, addressing a group of farmers and small-town residents about what is happening in Washington.

The topic of conversation was no different from other town-hall meetings the Republican congressman had that day. One resident asked what it would take to impeach President Barack Obama – a view echoed by a few others as the hour wore on. Some stressed resentment regarding the president's healthcare reform and too much regulation.

A few others wondered when a farm bill would pass - a second year

The faces of **FOOD STAMPS**

2012 - Huelskamp hasn't supported versions of the farm bill during his time in Congress. Wednesday he voted no again, along with the other three Kansas representatives, on the most current proposal that is expected to pass Congress Monday.

"I think it is wrong to continue to pay healthy, able adults food stamps," Huelskamp said, which brought a few comments of agreement from those in attendance after the meeting. "I think we should require some work, to look for a job."

While his own family has received thousands in government payments thanks to the farm bill, Huelskamp hasn't been timid about expressing his concerns about what he calls an

assistance program that "is in desperate need of reform."

Despite its farm bill moniker, the 80-year-old legislation is more than just a bill affecting the nation's agriculture producers, Huelskamp stresses.

SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, makes up 80 percent of the act - a section he says has grown fivefold in the past 13 years, from \$15 billion to \$76 billion today, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

His stance illustrates the sharp divide in Congress – even within the Republican Party. Some see food stamps as a safety net for the country's poorest, a large number of whom are children. Others, eyeing the nation's budget woes, want it on the chopping block, arguing that with the program reaching a record high last year, too many Americans are abusing the system.

Thus, for the past few years, the farm bill has fallen victim to Wash-

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ington gridlock, which is far from how things were done in 1973 when Kansas Republican Bob Dole and Democrat George McGovern sat at the table and reached a compromise to put food stamps and farm programs together.

One in seven Americans depends on food stamps to make sure there is enough food on the table – an increase of 123 percent in the past decade.

In Kansas, about 318,000 people – roughly 176,400 adults and 142,500 children – receive food stamps – 11 percent of the population. The number of Kansans on food stamps has grown by about 100,000 since the recession started in 2008.

On top of the 318,000 on food stamps, another 115,000 are considered food-insecure, meaning their consistent access to adequate food is limited by either lack of money or other resources at various times, according to Feeding America, a non-profit network of food banks.

While the system continues to grow, so does the disconnect between those on food stamps and those who are not, said Tonya Hornback, a life coach at New Beginnings, a Hutchinson nonprofit that provides temporary housing to displaced residents.

Hornback said the people she assists want to work. They want to get out of poverty and the situation they are in.

She has clients who walk nearly 30 blocks to get to a night-shift job. She has watched single mothers struggle to get food on the table. She has clients making minimum wage who still qualify for SNAP.

The full-time jobs aren't there, either, she adds. Job availability in recent months has slanted toward part-time work in low-wage industries.

"There are people out there who don't know what it is like to live on nothing," Hornback said.

There are cases of fraud – something Hornback didn't dismiss. One of her clients even admitted to The News that he has sold his vision card to buy drugs.

He, however, said he has been clean for about a year.

Still, it's enough to create an arguing point by politicians that the program is out of control, even though, as Hornback assesses, it's far less than the racketeering that goes on in other government programs, as well as on Wall Street.

"Give me a system that doesn't have someone who abuses it," she said.

Ken Thompson, director of fraud investigations for the Kansas De-

City. "We see hardworking people that just want to take care of their kids, just want to be able to meet their needs. We don't see people taking advantage of the system at all."

For most Americans, a \$10 or \$20 decrease in the monthly food budget would be absorbed with little thought. But the record number of Americans relying on food stamps saw cuts of about that much in November.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act had given food stamp recipients a temporary boost starting in 2009. That expired Nov. 1.

While the enhancement never was meant to last once the economy picked up, the cuts have been tough, said Gary Johnson. The 33-year-old Hutchinson resident lives with his wife, Amanda, and their two children – Taryn, 5, and Baylee, 2 – in a home owned by Interfaith Housing. He makes \$9.89 an hour working as a head custodian for USD 308 – but it is the only income, besides food assistance, that he has to support his family.

Amanda, 25, who has an associate's degree from Hutchinson Community College, stays home with the children. She said that after the November program cuts, they now receive \$380 a month for groceries – a \$100 decrease in assistance, or roughly 18 meals.

passion?"

At the time, Republicans sought \$40 billion in cuts to SNAP over a 10-year period.

"That means starving kids," Flinchbaugh said. "You can throw (the mother and father) off, but you aren't going to starve the kids, not in the US of A. He really got after them."

Maybe Republican leaders took their elder statesman to heart: SNAP cuts are minimal compared to previous versions of the bill. The House passed legislation Wednesday that ultimately would cut about \$800 million a year – or \$8 billion over 10 years. The reduction would equal roughly 1 percent of the program's record \$79.6 billion in spending for the budget year.

The Senate is expected to vote on the farm bill Monday.

However, for Huelskamp, the cuts weren't deep enough. He and the Kansas delegation voted against the measure. Huelskamp said last week at his town-hall meeting he would probably vote against the farm bill because there was no SNAP reform.

However, how to solve the problem of the growing number of Americans on food stamps is something for which Huelskamp doesn't have a definite answer.

"It's a bigger picture than food stamps," he said after the Lyons meeting. "Under the Obama admin-

Could the system be more efficient? Certainly, said Mariah Tanner Ehmke, an agricultural economics professor at the University of Wyoming. For instance, she said, there could be a greater educational component in the program to help people get out of the system.

Nevertheless, she notes, the program works for the purpose it serves. Most on food stamps don't want to be on them – and they aren't bragging about using a vision card for groceries.

"It isn't perfect, but it isn't broke," said Ehmke, who grew up in rural Stafford County. "I've been to countries where there is no social welfare program for families. In West Africa, instead of having food pantries, you have children going out at dusk picking up leftover food that wealthy people set on their steps."

As for George, he says he will work anywhere and is willing to learn. Daily he sits at a computer in his apartment complex, looking for jobs and submitting applications. He also is trying to teach himself to type. He has a job interview at a local collection agency – but typing is a requirement.

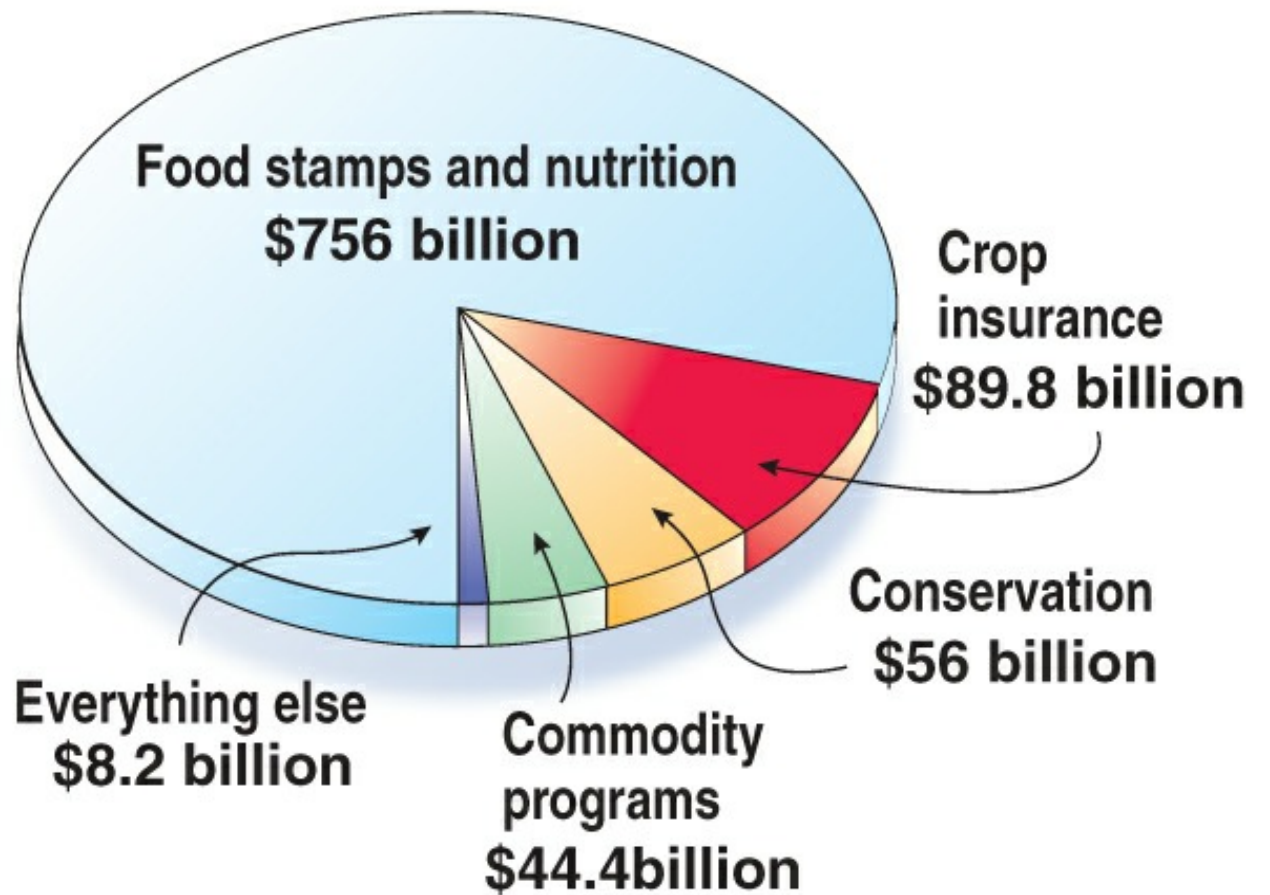
Still, he continues his search – confident some employer will want him.

"The cuts in food stamps hurt," he said. "But if I had a job, it would be OK."

- Amy Bickel

What's in the farm bill?

Costs from 2014 - 2023



Source: Congressional Budget Office and The Washington Post

Jim Heck/The Hutchinson News

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Economic reality hits home, hits hard for resident

When Marvin George was a kid he dreamed of being a writer.

Encouraged by his teacher and classmates, he saw himself as one day being successful. But, earning a living got in the way of his day dreams.

These days survival robs the 55-year-old of any creativity.

Out of work since 2009, he sat in his scantily furnished Fox Run apartment at the corner of Second Avenue and Monroe, on a recent morning. The weight of his worry didn't leave him much to smile about.

George has no clue where he'll go after March 15, when his two year time limit runs out at Fox Run. According to New Beginnings guidelines, after two years a person in their program should be ready move on to a rental or their own home.

"I want to work; I'm used to working and taking care of myself. At this point, I'll do anything," George said.

He has had three interviews in two years. Despite using all his creative juices to figure out how to earn enough food to eat and pay rent, "anything" has turned up nothing.

"They don't want to hire someone 10 years from retirement," he said.

January 1 his food stamps were cut from \$200 a month to \$18. He has been drawing out of his retirement to pay his bills. His \$25,000 nest egg has dwindled by half since he lost his job the day before Thanksgiving in 2009.

"I'll have nothing to retire on. If I don't find a job soon, I'm screwed," he said. His shrinking nest egg is also hurting him, making him ineligible for more assistance.

Now he expects it will disappear quickly once he finds another place to live. Because it's hard to beat a deal like he has at Fox Run paying \$150 a month, he's not very optimistic.

"A year from now I'll have to find a bridge and put my address on it," he said, sadly.

Currently he draws about \$500 a month out of retirement to pay his bills and live. Along with the apartment rent he pays for a storage unit for all his belongings.

In Kansas, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients must be working or in training. But, at his age with no technical skills, George sees little hope. He knows he isn't very marketable. In desperation he even applied for disability payments, even though he knows he isn't disabled. He was declined.

For 20 years he made a living in the woodworking business, cutting, sanding and bundling products at Woodwork Manufacturing and Supply where he began work at \$5.50 an hour. In two decades his salary increased to \$8.50 an hour, George said. Still, he was able to save \$25,000 in a 401K. But, then the day before Thanksgiving he was laid off work.

He started collecting unemployment with three extensions, but he still didn't find another job. He was forced to move out of the home he rented and in with his sister. They had a falling out, and he was able to get into New Beginnings transitional housing.

A wisp of man wearing a Moody Blues shirt, he sees the world through coke-bottle glasses and admits to being a Star Trek fan. The only picture on his wall is of him as a little boy, with his mother and a few snapshots tucked inside the frame.

He's soft spoken and speaks of a best friend in Wichita. They could be more if she didn't have a boyfriend, he says with a shy smile. He never married - came close once, but has remained alone.

A 1977 graduate of Wichita's North High School, he has friends in Wichita looking for jobs for him.

While others might be able to pinpoint poor choices in their life that left them struggling in poverty, George doesn't believe he's in this situation because of anything he did or didn't do. As far as the food stamp cuts go, he can understand the government making cuts, but not 90 percent as in his case.

"I wish they had left it up to the local DCF office, they kind of know my situation," he said. "But \$18 won't make it for one person."

He continues to meet with his life coach Tonya Hornback at New Beginnings. She admits his age is a deterrent.

"Any time you have somebody who is older it is more difficult to find a job," Hornback said.

Those hiring begin worrying about medical issues. Can their body sustain the condition in the work place? With their age, how close are they to retirement and the probability of becoming a long time employee?

Younger people coming into the job market have technical skills. They begin using technology in grade school or younger.

"Back in the day the diploma or GED went a lot further," Hornback said. "Now you need technical college or at least some of the skills taught there."

Still they plod onward.

"She's a taskmaster," George said of Hornback. She insists he applies for five jobs a day. He said that can be a grueling task.

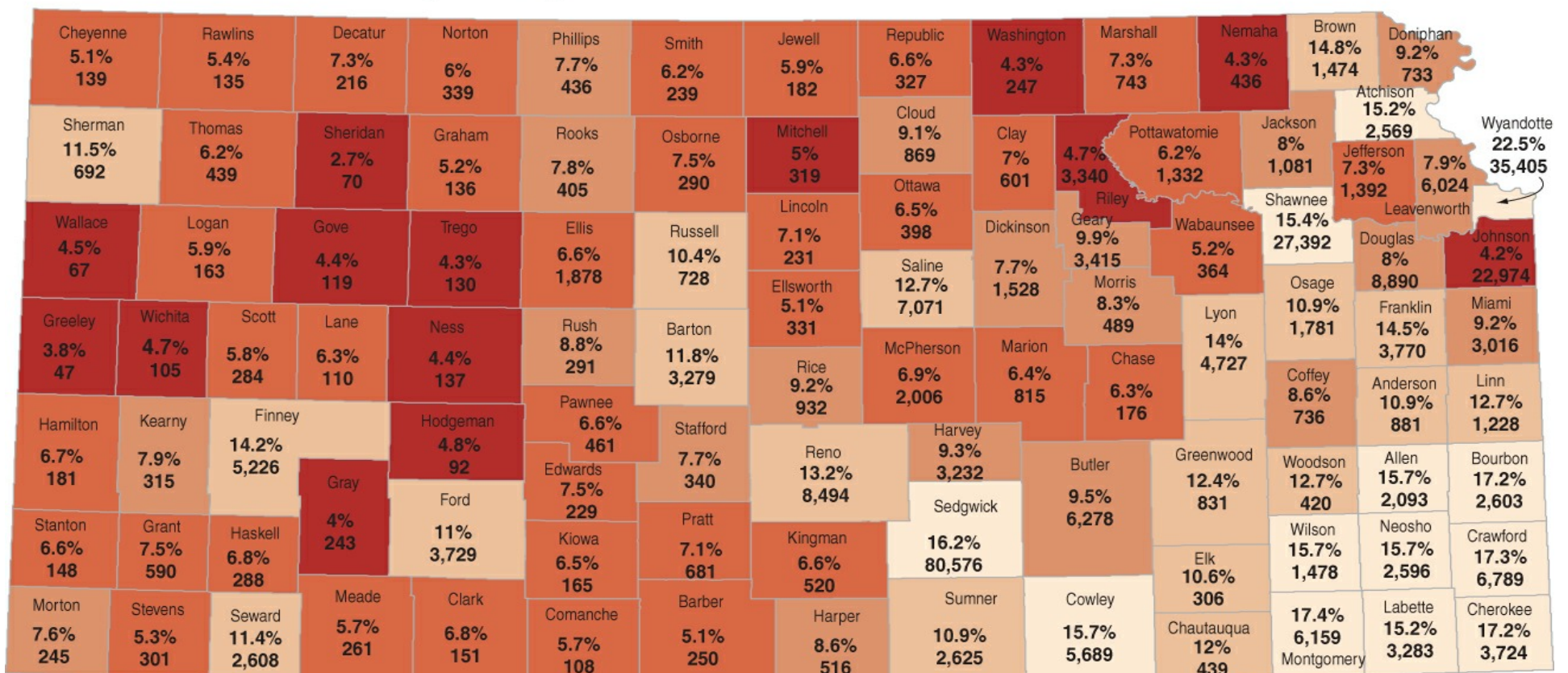
On January 27, George was down to his last dollar. He imagined when his \$18 arrived in February he would purchase a case of ramen noodles and hope they lasted the month.

But, in the meantime he isn't the only one worried about his future. Hornback is too.

"Anytime you have client who is struggling it bothers me," she said. "He's a really nice guy."

- Kathy Hanks

Kansas food stamp recipients



11.5% Top number shows percent of residents of each county receiving food assistance.
692 Bottom number shows total number of people in the county receiving food assistance.



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Trying to look beyond the need

Family looks forward to the day it won't need help

Someday, down the road, Gary and Amanda Johnson dream of owning their home and not being dependent on food stamps.

For now this Hutchinson family of four relies on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to put food on the table.

"The day we are off food stamps I will rejoice," said Gary.

The couple has set goals to ensure that day will eventually come.

Gary has a full time job with USD 308 as a head custodian at HMS 8, but still his family is part of the 13.2 percent of Reno County residents receiving food stamp assistance. They are also part of the 1 in 7 Americans according to The Associated Press, who are now covered by SNAP. Economists are warning that simply having a job may no longer be enough for self-sufficiency in today's economy. Currently they are a one-income family after Amber, 25, lost her job last spring when Quiznos closed. She has found it cheaper to stay home rather than work and pay for day care for Taryn, 5, and Baylee, 2.

"It's a catch-22," she said.

She could work and make the same amount of money that she would with food stamps, because of the cost of paying for day care and gas to get to work. Instead she stays home with their daughters, and relies on food stamps for the food on their table.

Gary makes \$9.89 an hour working 40 hours a week. Their expenses each month, not including food, are \$1,100 and from that they pay \$375 rent, utilities, car insurance, phone and non food items such as shampoo and conditioner. Amanda even made her own laundry soap in October and it lasted for several months. They currently receive \$380 a month in food stamp assistance; it was cut by \$100 in November. When broken down their food stamp allotment allows them a little more than \$10 a day for their family of four. They make sure to buy meat bundles at Berridge IGA, in Nickerson, that last about 22 days. It also helps that Taryn, who



Amanda and Gary Johnson, with their children Taryn, 5, and Baylee, 2. Gary works as the head custodian at HMS-8 for USD 308. Amanda lost her job last spring, when Quizno's closed. The family relies on food stamps to make ends meet each month.

The faces of FOOD STAMPS

Gary, because there are fewer days to earn money.

Back when Taryn began with Reno County Early Head Start Program, the family learned about InterFaith Housing. They visited with Lorna Moore who directs the Creating Assets, Savings and Hope program, known as CASH.

"Thanks to Lorna we have found a cheaper way to live," said Amanda. They rent their two bedroom, newly remodeled home from HIS.

As participants they must commit to three parts of the CASH program: attend six hours of financial education, complete four life-skills workshops, and save for a minimum of six months with a minimum deposit of \$20.00 per month. They automatically have \$60 withdrawn from Gary's paycheck every month to go into their CASH account. That will eventually be used to buy a home or for a college education.

"Despite their limited income they have been saving every month," said Moore.

Both Gary and Amanda were raised in families that used food stamps. Amanda was removed from her home and placed in foster care living in a series of both happy and unhappy homes. But, when she turned 18 she aged-out of the system, and went to Hutchinson Community College on a tuition waiver for foster care recipients. She has her associate's degree with a focus on social work. Taryn was born before Amanda met Gary on an online chat room. They hit it off and he flew from his home in California to Kansas to meet her. They were married at the Reno County Courthouse on Feb. 14, 2012.

"I don't like taking and not giving back," said Amanda, who does volunteer work at the Reno County Early Head Start Program. "They have been very kind," she said.

Gary says food stamps can be a helpful tool for those who desperately need it and a necessity at the moment for his family. But, he knows that people abuse the system. He also knows there are extreme misconceptions by others. "People look at me using my vision card and see my iPhone," Amanda said. It makes her feel like they are

judging her, but the iPhone was a gift. Others see their shiny black Honda in the driveway and wonder how they can afford such a vehicle. But, it was a gift from Gary's mother.

According to Mariah Ehmke, an agricultural economist with University of Wyoming, she has graduate students who use food stamps, students who have small children or families and need help for a few years as they get through college. "There is a lot of research on how long people remain in poverty. Sixty to 70 percent of the people in poverty today won't be in a decade. "I don't see the abuse. It is not something people brag about being on food stamps. It is pretty shameful thing," Ehmke said.

On average, Kansans spend about 26 months on food stamps, said Sandra Kimmons, benefits director for the Kansas Department of Children and Families.

The Johnsons are well aware that food stamps are not a permanent solution, but a temporary fix. They can see a bright future where they are stable and food stamp free. "I want to go on with school," said Amanda. "I have a passion to work with foster kids."

- Kathy Hanks

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Kansas House delegation votes “no” on new farm bill

Kansas is the nation's No. 1 wheat producer. It's known as the breadbasket of the nation.

Yet, all four Republican Kansas representatives in a state where agriculture is the backbone of the economy voted against the farm bill.

In fact, according to the New York Times, which analyzed votes back to the 1950s, it is the first time all Kansas representatives have voted against a farm bill.

The bill is expected to cost \$956.4 billion over the next decade. About 80 percent goes to food stamps.

“Eastern Kansans know I have been a strong advocate for the passage of a long term, five-year Farm Bill, which would provide certainty and stability for those who produce food, fuel, and fiber for the world,” said Rep. Lynn Jenkins in a

statement defending her vote. “The final conference report was full of missed opportunities and was one I could not support.”

Jenkins also noted concern about Country-of-Origin Labeling, as did Rep. Mike Pompeo, who, in a press release, warned the bill would leave Kansas producers vulnerable to global trade disputes while failing to address concerns about Grain Inspection Packers and Stockyards Administration and Country-of-Origin Labeling.

“This legislation will cause serious trade and regulatory problems for our state's livestock producers. Washington must not ignore how important livestock is to our Kansas economy.”

A day before the House vote, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association released a statement Tuesday saying it opposed the Farm Bill the way it is presented because of

its mandatory country-of-origin labeling. The group does contribute to Pompeo and Jenkins's campaign.

As for Big First District Congressman Tim Huelskamp, no food stamp reform remains his top reason for voting no.

“This program is in desperate need of reform, and yet this bill makes only nominal changes,” he said. “Instead of status quo in this, the fastest-growing welfare program in the entire government, we should have taken the opportunity to provide meaningful work reform requirements, especially for able-bodied adults, as we passed in the U.S. House.”

Rep. Kevin Yoder hasn't vocalized why he voted against the legislation.

- Amy Bickel

Lynn Jenkins



“Today's Farm Bill costs too much and fails to achieve any significant regulatory reform. The inclusion of high target prices for commodities will create false production signals for producers and will lead to larger subsidy payments. Also, as a member of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade, I could not ignore policies which will trigger trade disputes. These are just a few examples of the many reforms that were left out of this bill and are issues on which I

have been a strong advocate for in the past.

“I did not expect to make easy decisions when I came to Washington. There are many good provisions which I support in this legislation, but unfortunately, the negatives outweigh the positives. Kansans know that this bill not only impacts our farmers and ranchers but every single American family. Over the coming weeks and months ahead, I will do everything in my power to continue to be a strong voice for both American agriculture and the American consumer.”

Mike Pompeo



“Over the past two years I have worked to craft a Farm Bill that reflects Kansas values, supports Kansas producers, and respects Kansas taxpayers. While this legislation contains some positive provisions -- including strengthening crop insurance, ending direct payments, and providing stability for Kansas producers -- in total, this bill misses the mark.”

“This open-ended welfare program continues to make up 80 percent of this bill. That means \$800 billion of the \$1 trillion legislation is out the door before the first dime is invested in agriculture. Unfortunately, this final bill makes only cosmetic changes to this out-of-control entitlement program.”

“Last year I voted in favor of a farm bill that was not perfect, but a step forward. Voting against this bill today was not an easy decision, but I believe it reflects a step backward to the old Washington of pet projects, reckless spending, and harmful regulation. I remain committed to ensuring that Kansas farmers, ranchers, co-ops, and other agribusiness have the support they need to compete in the global economy.”

Tim Huelskamp



“There are some good things in the bill. I believe the compromise dairy provisions are a positive step away from government control of milk markets. The crop insurance program has been strengthened, and is better equipped than ever before to assist producers in times of trouble. But these bright spots are not enough to warrant enacting this bill. We could have done so much better for farmers, ranchers, consumers and for the American taxpayer.”

- Kathy Hanks

With work dried up, local man tries to hang on

There are days when John Richard Perry wonders how he ever got to this point in his life.

Like other 61-year-olds he should be making a last ditch effort to save for his upcoming retirement, but instead he's living in a transitional apartment at New Beginnings, unemployed, and pretty much unmarketable.

“I've worked all my life,” Perry said. “I've been a janitor here, there and yonder.”

Perry has the unfortunate luck of working at places that seem to close down or lay off workers.

His last full time job was in 2010. He was a janitor at Liberty Homes at Yoder. But over the years he has been laid off from Cessna, Consolidated and Eaton, where he had been a machinist.

“Deluxe specialty, there was another place I shut down,” said Perry, recounting his unfortunate work record.

But, after losing his last job he became homeless. Always a renter, there was no money left for the rent.

For the first time in his life he was getting food stamps and sleeping on friends' couches or porches. When he slept outdoors in the back of a house near the library, he would put a piece of cardboard down and then a blanket and pillow. The only problem was all the mosquitoes and flies.

“I appreciate my family and all they do for me,” he said. “But, I don't like imposing on family or friends.”

For a while he was living at the small storage unit he was renting for his belongings, until the police kicked him out.

It all began well for Perry, who recalls a happy childhood growing up in South Hutchinson, graduating from high school in 1970, attending trade school and then serving two years in the U.S. Navy.

He was married for 12 years, and is thankful he has no children to worry about. He doesn't drink or have any addictions. It's just that life passed him by. He also has worked as a machinist, but there aren't too many of those jobs left, he noted.

He does have two part-time jobs he counts on annually, working as a janitor at the Kansas State Fair and at the National Junior College Athletic Association tournament every March in Hutchinson.

He collects cans and walks to Midwest Iron with them to turn in for cash.

He hopes to hold on until next year, when he can retire early. For a man who has worked most his life he hopes there will be some social security coming in.

He currently receives a \$189 in food stamps, a cut from \$200 he was receiving, but he says that's OK because he doesn't eat much.

But, Tonya Hornback, with New Beginnings, says that's all the money Perry gets. While he utilizes the soup kitchen, if he has spent \$189 before the end of the month, he can go an entire weekend without food.

He admits to being depressed.

“I'm used to having a job. How did I get to this point in my life?”

Retirement can't arrive soon enough, he said.

“I worked all my life, I deserve it.”

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**FOOD
STAMPS**

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Food aid had early farm link

It all began with Mabel McFiggin.

It was 1939 and McFiggin, an unemployed factory worker from Rochester, New York, bought surplus butter, prunes and eggs using the nation's first ever food stamps.

They came in two colors, orange and blue. McFiggin, as the program's inaugural recipient, paid \$4 and received \$6 worth of stamps.

It's just the beginning of the lengthy history of the welfare program, which turns 75 years old this year. The first program helped 20 million people in a four-year span at the tail end of the Great Depression. That Depression-era program lasted but a few years, but now, more Americans than ever are receiving food stamps, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture reporting more than 47 million people rely on government assistance to put food on the table.

1939

In essence, the idea was simple: To help the nation's farmers and feed the poor at the same time.

President Franklin Roosevelt signed the first farm policy into law in 1933 in an effort improve the agriculture economy and pull America out of the Great Depression.

Yet, in 1939, agriculture surpluses were driving down prices and unemployment was high. A March 14, 1939, article in the Washington Post described the food stamp program as a farm recovery program with the unemployed eating the nation's surplus food.

"If the (commodity) prices fell below a certain level, then the government went into the marketplace and bought those commodities to drive up the price support," said Barry Flinchbaugh, a Kansas State University economist and agricultural policy expert.

The government then distributed the surplus food, such as milk and cheese, to the poor, Flinchbaugh said.

"We got a picture of a gorge, with farm surpluses on one cliff and under-nourished city folks with outstretched hands on the other," said the program's first director, Milo Perkins. "We set out to find a practical way to build a bridge across that chasm."

According to the Catholic Journal, for every \$1 of orange stamps purchased, 50 cents worth of blue stamps were received. Those receiving benefits could buy any food with orange stamps, but recipients could only use the blue stamps to buy food determined by the USDA to be surplus.

By 1943, the orange and blue stamp program ended "since the conditions that brought the program into being – unmarketable food surpluses and widespread unemployment – no longer existed," according to the USDA.

Poverty on the campaign trail

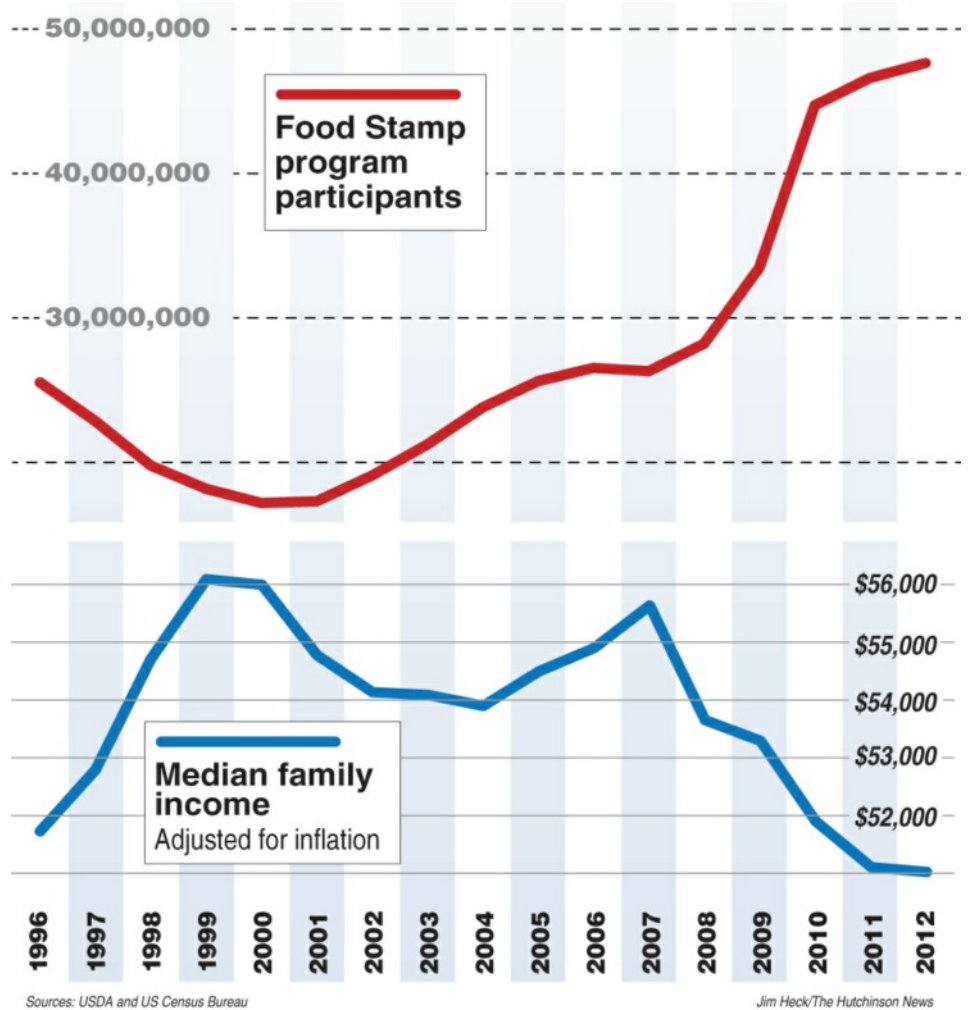
Despite the program's end, America still had poverty. Advocates for the poor worked to revive a food assistance program.

In 1959, Rep. Lenore Sullivan, D-Mo., successfully championed a legislative amendment to launch a pilot, USDA-administered food-stamp program, according to the USDA history. While the Eisenhower Administration never used the authority, President John F. Kennedy, moved by the poverty he saw on the campaign trail in West Virginia, used his first executive order to expand food distribution. Recipients were still to purchase stamps, with the government's emphasis on increasing the consumption of perishables.

Mr. and Mrs. Alderson Muncy of Paynesville W.V. were the first to use the new food stamp program, purchasing \$95 in food stamps for their 15-person household. Their first food stamp transaction was buying a can of pork and beans at a local supermarket, according to the USDA.

By January 1964, the pilot program had expanded from eight to 43 areas in 22 states with 380,000 participants. Later that month, President Johnson signed a permanent program into law. By 1966, more than 1 million people were using the food stamp benefits.

By the late 1970s, recipients no longer had to pay for stamps. Legislation in 1977 also established food stamp guidelines and a poverty line, as well as penalized households whose heads voluntarily quit jobs, restricted eligibility for students and aliens and eliminated the requirement that households must have cooking facilities, according to USDA history.



A marriage made in heaven?

It was Kansas' own Bob Dole who welded food stamps and farm spending into one bill.

Call it political genius. That was the 1970s and Dole, a Republican senator, and George McGovern, a South Dakota Democrat, formed an unlikely alliance. However, the pairing helped gain support from urban legislators for agriculture subsidies, along with rural support for food programs.

The precedent continued until last summer, when the House split the two. However, food stamps and the farm bill came back together late last year. On Wednesday, the House passed farm and food legislation, sending the measure to the Senate, which will vote on it Monday.

Tying the two together is a marriage that Flinchbaugh says is needed.

"We need each other," says Flinchbaugh. "If we get rid of food stamps (from the farm bill), if you think of it that way, you don't understand where little babies come from in the political world."

There are 400 urban congressional districts and 35 rural districts he said.

"That is not rocket science," Flinchbaugh said. "Do you think you can pass a farm bill when you look at it that way?"

- Amy Bickel

Details of the farm bill

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The huge, five-year farm bill that Congress sent to President Obama on Tuesday sets policy for hundreds of programs, including farm subsidies and food stamps. It would make small cutbacks to both, eliminating some subsidy programs and cutting the \$80 billion-a-year food stamp program by \$800 million a year, or 1 percent. Conservatives had proposed much higher cuts.

- Broken down by year, the bill is expected to cost around \$96 billion annually.

- Almost 80 percent of the money will go to food stamps for the needy. In 2013, an average of 47.6 million people used food stamps at a cost of \$79.6 billion. Around 15 percent of the money in the farm bill is designated for farm subsidies and crop insurance subsidies. The rest would go to conservation, rural development, renewable energy and other farm programs.

- The bill would eliminate subsidies called direct payments, which cost about \$4.5 billion a year and are paid to farmers whether they farm or not. But it uses most of those savings to create new farm subsidies and expand crop insurance. Farmers need a government safety net because agriculture is a tough, unpredictable industry and the nation's food supply is dependent on family farms staying in business.

- The bill would save around \$1.65 billion annually overall, but critics say those savings could be erased if the weather or the market doesn't cooperate. Many of the new subsidies would only kick in if a farmer has losses, and it's impossible to predict exactly how much the programs will eventually cost.

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

Snap cuts take bite out of budget

Grandchildren climbed on Christy McGee as she slapped a cockroach coming out of the cushion of the couch inside this apartment at the Landmark.

"We spray, they shouldn't be here," she said.

At 42, McGee thought she was done raising kids. But when her daughter decided she didn't want to be a mother to Shakai, 4, and Deshaun, 2, there was no second thoughts about it, she became their legal guardian.

Her love for the children is apparent as she beams and does a little grandma bragging; explaining that Shakai knows her ABC's and can count to 13. But, Shakai was busy playing with a girl from another apartment and didn't want to slow down to recite. Deshaun disappeared, shyly hiding under the table.

"He really isn't shy," she laughs.

Though she desperately wants to work, McGee is on disability after being injured in a car accident in 1997. For the past year and a half she has been getting food stamps to feed her grandchildren. At first she received \$381, but this fall it was cut almost \$100 to \$299.

Since Jan. 1, her food assistance was dropped to \$290.

"My disability payment went up so the food stamps went down \$9," McGee said. When other income goes up food stamps go down.

She also receives \$271 in cash assistance through the Grandparents Rights program, which is assistance for grandparents with custody of their grandchildren. They can receive that money until they are 18. She uses that money to buy diapers for Deshaun and clothing for the children.

She's diabetic so it's important she eat healthy, and she budgets plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits in their diet. Because she doesn't have a vehicle, usually they walk the few blocks from the Landmark to Dillon's for groceries. But when she can get a ride, she'll load up her grocery cart at Aldi's.

McGee and her grand kids moved into the Landmark in September, because it was cheaper than the house she was renting. She pays \$500 a month, utilities included, for the two bedroom/two bath apartment. They have problems with mice eating the labels off the cans of food in the cupboards.



Christy McGee holds her grandson Deshaun, 2, while her granddaughter Shakia, 4, looks on. McGee was disabled in a car accident in 1997 and has legal custody of her grandchildren. She relies on food stamps to feed her grandchildren, but her food assistance has been reduced in recent months due to program reductions.

She has set out mousetraps, but the mice just nibble the peanut butter she puts down for bait.

Shakai opens a lower cupboard hoping to show off the mouse, as if it's the family pet. There is a cat in residence at the Landmark, which McGee hopes will help with the problem.

While McGee tries to manage her food stamps, by Jan. 30 they were out of money and would have to wait until Feb. 6, before a new round of food stamps arrived. While the Reno County Food Bank could be an option because she hadn't been there since October, she thought they would be OK with their food supply for another week.

"We eat a lot of ramen noodles," McGee said, as she opened up a bag of chips for Shakai to snack on. "I like noodles," said Shakai.

"Tonight it will be sandwiches and chips for supper," McGee said.

Back in the 1990's when McGee was raising her three children alone she received food stamps.

"The program was different," she said. "For three kids and myself I got \$500. Now for me and the kids we get \$290 and prices are more expensive."

For now she says she'll have to make adjustments in what she spends. She's not too concerned because her grandchildren are young and don't eat much. As they get older and their appetites in-

crease it will be more of a challenge.

If she could speak with her representatives in Washington she would ask them to consider cutting their own pay before they cut any more from food stamps.

"They aren't looking at the families in need," she said.

And for any politician that says she needs to get a job, she certainly wishes she could.

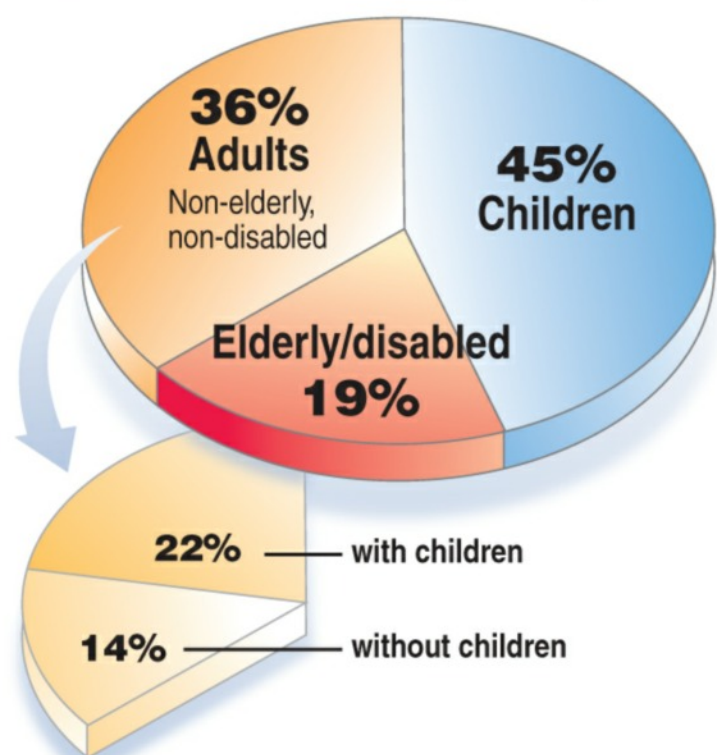
"If I could, I would go back to work," she said. "Before the accident I would work 14 hour days."

As the kids continued to jump on her, she offers hugs and kisses.

"Sometimes I get mad at my daughter," McGee said. "But, I wouldn't trade this for anything."

- Kathy Hanks

Who are food stamp recipients?



Sources: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, USDA

Jim Heck/The Hutchinson News

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

Survival has become couple's aim

Rebecca Call gripped the giant sign as if she was trying to keep the mast of a sail boat from blowing out to sea.

Despite robust winds, she was glad to be standing where she was at the corner of K-61 and 17th Avenue holding the board that announced "Huge Inventory Blowout" for Sears' going out of business sale.

After all, she was out of work, so being paid \$8 an hour to work five hours, several days a week bringing in money she desperately needed was like manna.

In recent days she quit her job at the Chinese Kitchen at Dillon's Market Place where she had worked part time for the past four months, adding extra hours when ever they were available. She had been warned she would be fired once the boss returned. Customers complained one too many times co-workers said. She felt like she was being targeted so without thinking it through she told them she'd do them a favor and just quit.

Call knows it was an impulsive act. Now more than ever she needs an income because her food stamps were cut Jan. 1. Up until this fall she was receiving \$200 a month, and then in October it was cut to \$189, before being totally cut off Jan. 1 from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

"They said it was because I was making too much money," Call said. "But, that's not true. They looked at my gross pay but that's not what I was bringing home."

She was being paid \$7.45 an hour job. In reality her take home, after child support, was \$137.

Call is trying to make a clean break from the past four years of drug addiction. She met her fiancé, Pat Mahoney, through a drug dealer.

Together they have come from what she describes as "a very dark place."

"I lost my house, my job, my kids, everything went downhill," she said, during her time of addiction.

The mother of four children, the 38-year-old is also a grandmother. Her daughters were taken away from her and back child support was drawn from her paycheck for one of the children's dad. Another daughter, 20 year-old Tea West, is on her own and also a mother of a son being raised by the father. Another daughter has been adopted.

She and Mahoney moved to a small apartment at Fox Run Dec.



Rebecca Call and Patrick Mahoney load groceries from their shopping trip at the Reno County Food Bank.

Below: Rebecca Call holds signs at the intersection of 11th Avenue and K-61 in Hutchinson.

30, after four months of living at New Beginnings transitional housing.

"We were bound and determined to get on our feet," said Call. Now they are paying \$180 a month for the furnished apartment, as they transition further into one day renting their own place.

On Feb. 8 Call will be drug free one year. For four years she had been an I.V. drug user.

"I self medicated on meth," she said. "The drugs were killing me."

Some days death seemed like the only option and she tried to commit suicide.

She realized she couldn't stoop any lower, nor could Mahoney, who was faced with drug court, and already had a criminal record.

"The main thing helping me out is my kids," said Mahoney. He stays clean for two children. It also helps to have Rebecca by his side.

"She's my woman, she sticks with me," he said.

He is currently working with a counselor in the Kansas Department of Children and Families' vocational rehabilitation program, who is helping him prepare for work.

Call is proud there has been no backsliding into the previous life, which she says was evil. She's proud to be back to her Christian



faith and has been baptized, and is now accountable to her Celebrate Recovery group at CrossPoint Church. And she's equally pleased that Mahoney is now a Christian.

That's all the good news. But some days the challenges are overwhelming. Like trying to find work "I'm gruff and I'm loud," she said. "That's my personality. I'm bi-polar and you never know what will happen."

For now she can't afford her prescription medications, but thankfully because of the sign holding job they can pay their rent.

By late January they were out of money and food stamps and headed to the Reno County Food Bank.

If food stamps were cut completely, Mahoney said he would do whatever was necessary to feed his children.

"I guarantee you if food stamps are cut, crime will go up," Mahoney said.

Meanwhile Call says they are lucky they can hold the signs and get paid.

"That gives us another month to get money."

By then hopefully she will have a job. She says she will put in 110 percent with her work.

"If you show me how to do it, I can do it," she said. "Right now I have to do all I can to survive."

- Kathy Hanks

THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS

Vocational rehab helping woman get education

Sitting alone in a packed McDonalds, a woman with pink streaks in her short blond hair bent over her breakfast occasionally glancing around diffidently.

With reservation, Laura agreed to talk about how she was trying to better herself for her son.

Since September she has been receiving monthly assistance from the SNAP program. Like most Kansans on assistance she did see a \$20 cut-back in November and is currently getting \$347.

"I have an 11-year-old. I have to put food in his belly," Laura said.

While Laura was willing to talk, she declined to give her last name or the name of her 11 year old son.

She admitted to enjoying an early morning indulgence at McDonald's as she waited for classes to begin at Hutchinson Community College. Thanks to a Pell grant, the 39 year old will finally attend college.

"I'm a late bloomer," she said.

She was separated from her husband, a truck driver. Maybe they will get back together, but for now she is on her own with a child to feed.

"I figured I needed to do something to take care of my son and me," she said, explaining why she had enrolled in college.

Laura has lofty dreams of becoming a social worker, and working with children.

"I am a survivor of the state's foster care system," she said. "I want to improve the system."

For now all she knows is being a waitress and working in fast foods, but she knows there is no way working in fast food can buy all her food and pay the rent.

"I got it in my head that one way or the other I was going back to school," Laura said.

With determination, she is ready to do more with her life, and thanks to the guidance of a mentor through Vocational Rehabilitation Services, that might be possible. Because Laura has some learning disabilities, she has been assigned a counselor through the vocational rehabilitation program with the Kansas Department of Children and Families.

A bond is forming with the two women. The counselor helped her realize what she wanted in life, which is to help others as she had been helped in her life. She has set a goal of becoming a social worker.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

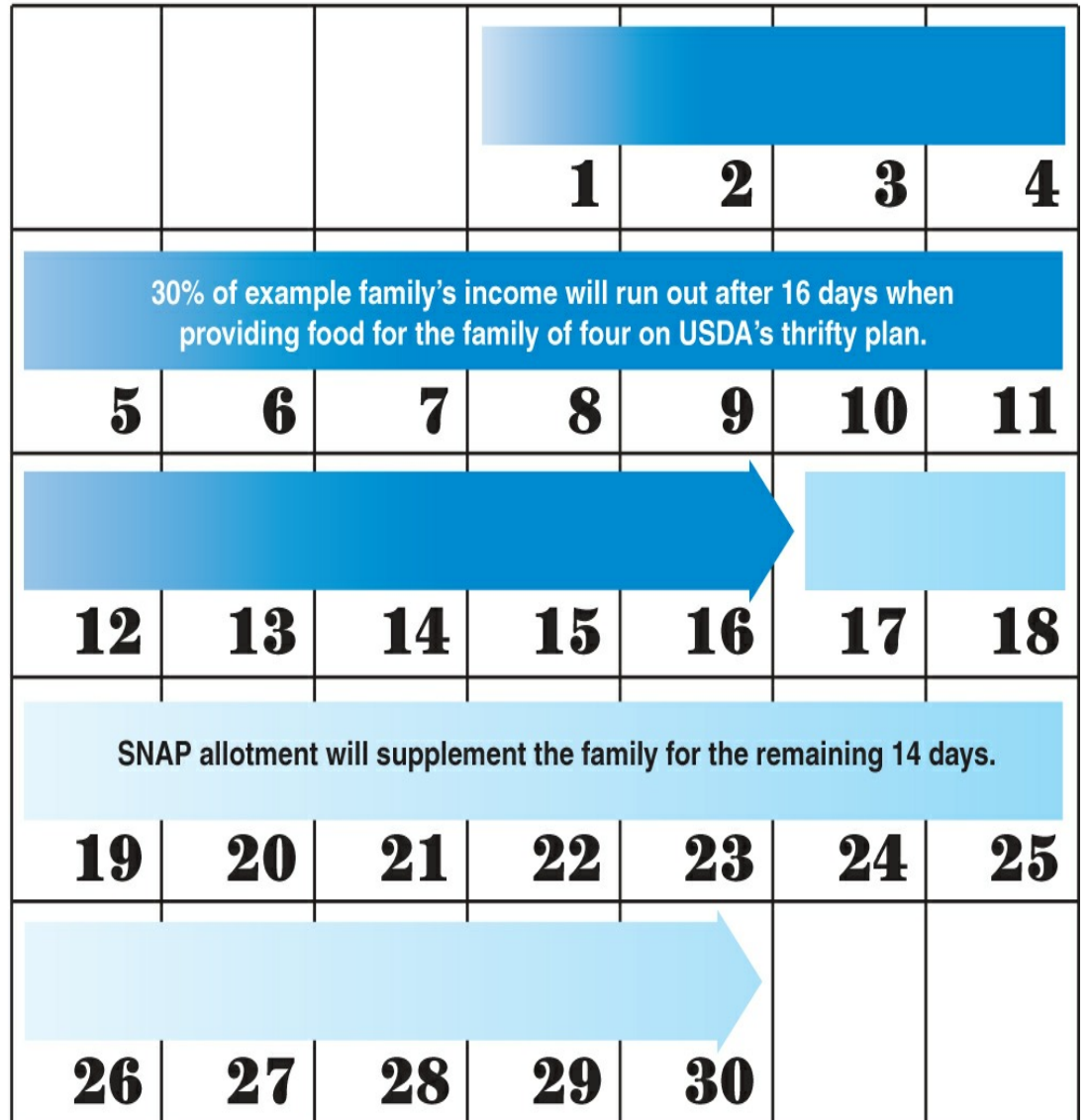
The USDA uses national food intake data and grocery price information to calculate different costs for a healthy diet at home. The numbers for a four-member family are: **thrifty food plan**, \$632 a month; **low-cost food plan**, \$829 a month; **moderate-cost plan**, \$1,038 a month; **liberal plan**, \$1,258 a month.

The food stamp (SNAP) benefit formula assumes that families will spend 30 percent of their net income for food; SNAP provides enough additional benefits to meet the cost of the **thrifty food plan**.

Example family of four
 $\$1,139$ Net monthly income
 $\times .3$
 $\$342$ Rounded up from \$341.70

 $\$632$ Maximum allotment for 4
 $-\$342$ 30% of net income
 $\$290$ SNAP allotment for a full month

Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Services



Jim Heck/The Hutchinson News

"She directed me in the right direction," Laura said. She was currently waiting to learn what job she would have through the work study program, which is a requirement with her Pell grant.

The vocational rehabilitation program is for anyone with disabilities that are barriers to employment. They can range from difficulty hearing to a double amputee, to a person with learning or cognitive problems. The program empowers Kansans with disabilities to become gainfully employed and self-sufficient.

Twenty percent of the national population has some form of disability, said Michael Donnelly, director of rehabilitation services, a division of DCF.

Generally counselors meet once a month, if not more, with their clients. Laura knows she can call her counselor any time, and because there is someone cheering her on and who she must be accountable to, her chance to succeed is greater.

Donnelly said the objective of the program is to find employment that meets and matches up with the talent, skills and interests of the client. If they are not interested in the job

they generally won't keep working at it. The program offers the services and support that helps the client be successful.

According to Donnelly, 1,700 people got and kept those jobs for at least 90 day, in 2013, closing out their VR cases. Their average wage was \$9.80 an hour and they were averaging 30 hours a week.

"The other thing important to note, as a result there are \$21 million in the return on investment, it's very good. It's good for the economy. For each dollar earned as a result of a VR placement, there is about \$1.66 in total earnings generated through the economy, according to a study done by Wichita State University. Further, for each person employed through VR, there are about 1.85 total jobs created in the overall economy," Donnelly said.

Now that Laura is a student, she's receiving \$2,822 for the semester through the Pell grant and is enrolled in 12 hours of study. It's a lot to digest for this first time freshman. She is enrolled in an orientation class, English Composition I, Psychology and Introduction to Social Work.

She has told her son, who is currently a student at Lincoln School, that college will not be an option, but a requirement.

"He wants to be a bull rider, a bull fighter or a fire fighter," she laughs. "He's a cowboy all the way."

Laura is making it happen because she and her son are able to live with their in-laws, despite the separation from her husband.

"My husband and I get along better now," she said. Because he is a truck driver, he lives most the time in his truck.

Her parents divorced when she was a young child.

"My mom couldn't care for me and my dad didn't want to," she said. "I was a child in need of care at 12."

She has been on and off of food assistance since 1998.

Despite the current cuts, thanks to the Pell grant, she says she can make their food stamps stretch.

Using her Vision card, she makes monthly trips to Aldi's where she fills her cart to overflowing. Then she makes trips to Nickerson's IGA to purchase meat bundles.

"I shop smart," she said.

- Kathy Hanks

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

State toughens up work requirements

Mark figures it is time to move on.

The bearded man sat at a table eating chicken and noodles, welcoming a warm meal on such a cold day. He doesn't have the money to pay his heating bills, or his rent for that matter – bumming electricity off his neighbor to run a heater while spending recent chilly days under a pile of blankets.

Mark, too humiliated to tell his last name, had been receiving \$189 in food stamps since he lost his job 1 1/2 years ago – something he says was no one's fault but his own. But in early January, his food assistance was cut off – the same month he received his eviction notice.

The problem, he says, is he can't find another job – or, at least, one he is willing to take.

"I don't think anyone wants to jump headlong into the system," he said, but added that the government money he received for groceries "did help."

Across Kansas Jan. 1, more than 20,000 able-bodied residents lost their food stamp provisions under a new state policy Republicans are hoping to implement nationwide, according to the Kansas Department of Children and Families.

It's all part of an effort to crack down on food stamp spending under the Brownback administration. In the past year, state officials have ramped up efforts to curb fraud. In addition, last fall, DCF decided to drop its participation in a federal grant program designed to help poor people apply for food-stamp benefits – sending more \$70,000 administered by five Kansas agencies, back to Washington.

The most recent change on those on food stamps, however, came when the state reinstated work requirements for recipients between 18 and 50 who are able-bodied and have no dependant children.

The federal government requires adults capable of work who have no children in their home to receive food assistance for only three months out of 36 if they don't have jobs or have signed up for schooling, said DCF Benefits Director Sandra Kimmons.

States, however, can waive this requirement during times of high unemployment, she said. Most states did so as part of the 2009 stimulus package and have been allowed to keep using the waiver as long as they meet certain criteria.

On Oct. 1, Kansas let the waiver lapse, thus joining a handful of states that didn't waive the work requirement.

For the 20,000 Kansans affected, such as Mark, their food stamp benefits ended Jan. 1.

Republicans, including Kansas Rep. Tim Huelskamp, blame part of the increasing cost of food stamps on the more lenient enrollment standards. The food stamp program, officially called the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program, or SNAP, grew to more than \$76 billion in 2013 – a 52 percent climb since the waiver was implemented four years earlier during the recession.

"The program is in desperate need of reform and yet this bill makes only nominal changes," Huelskamp said after voting against the current House farm bill proposal Wednesday. "Instead of status quo in this the fastest growing welfare program in the entire government, we should have taken the opportunity to provide meaningful work reform requirements, especially for able-bodied adults, as we passed in the U.S. House."

But Huelskamp also stated the economy hasn't improved much under the Obama Administration. He quoted that 24.1 million Americans are searching for work.

Hutchinson resident Rebecca Call is one of the millions looking for employment. Call, who was receiving \$189 a month in food stamps while trying to pick up as many extra hours as she could from her part-time, minimum-waged job at Dillons, also was one of the many whose benefits disappeared in January when her income rose above the SNAP guidelines.

Call, whose life story is complex, still is food insecure. She essentially lost her job a few weeks later after customer complaints and Call, who is bipolar, decided leaving would make it easier on everyone. Now she is living off her fiancé's \$189 a month in food stamps – which also supports his two young children when he has visitation.

A recovering drug addict who has been clean a year, Call tries to hide her worry. Yet, when she was trying to make ends meet on minimum wage - \$7.25 an hour – it didn't seem to put her ahead, she said.

"You have to work 20 hours to get food stamps, but I'll either make too much money or I won't make enough," she said, later adding, "You're damned if you do, damned

The Faces of Food Stamps



Above: Rebecca Call works as a sign holder for Sears.



Left: Amanda and Gary Johnson in their home with their children.

Rebecca Call and Patrick Mahoney shop at the Reno County Food Bank when their food stamps don't carry them through the month.



if you don't. Who can survive on that?"

While her financial situation is tough right now, she won't reapply for food stamps. She is optimistic that she will find work.

Mark, meanwhile, the nameless man who wants to get out of Hutchinson, doesn't seem too worried about his situation. He has good friends and neighbors who have helped him out.

Yet, there really is nothing for him in Hutchinson, he said. He stayed in town after he served a five-year prison sentence for aggravated robbery. For eight years, he worked a

laboring job, but his mouth got him into trouble.

So, on this cold day, he began searching out a charitable organization that could help him get a train ticket out of town.

"I want to move back to Kansas City where my mom lives," he said. "Or, maybe, to Colorado with my brother, he's a computer guy. I heard there might be places that are hiring."

But his ticket, which he secured with Hutchinson Catholic charity St. Vincent de Paul, a society with a mission to help those in need, hasn't been picked up.

- Amy Bickel

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

Array of lobbyists have stake in farm bill

For the past two years, the farm bill has been caught up in congressional gridlock, the debate centered on just what a trillion-dollar food and farm program should include.

Finally on Wednesday, the House passed legislation, sending it to the Senate, which is expected to vote Monday.

Nevertheless, at the end of the impasse, there were winners and there were losers.

The legislation, with its hefty price tag, attracted companies and organization from across the country, all wanting a piece of the farm bill pie.

According to opensecrets.org, the farm bill was the sixth-most heavily lobbied measure in Washington in 2013. More than 350 organizations - from Pepsi and Wal-Mart to the American Farm Bureau - spent cash to get their voices heard on what they thought should be in the legislation.

The American Farm Bureau spent the most time on the issue filing 23 times about their efforts in 2013, which show the farm organization spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, with crop insurance the most listed reason on disclosure reports.

Not that farm organizations just use their cash for lobbying, as OpenSecrets notes. They've sunk money into the campaigns of congressional representatives, including Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., who received nearly 46 percent of his campaign total in 2012 from agribusiness.

Meanwhile, farm groups weren't the only one wanting to shape the farm bill. PepsiCo lobbied about potential restrictions in food stamp spending, as well as childhood obesity and were among the top 10 farm bill lobbyists.

A few years ago in New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed prohibiting soda from being purchasable with food stamps, but the USDA shot down the idea.

Meanwhile, according to a report by Michele Simon, who spearheads the firm Eat Drink Politics, some of the top groups who teamed up to fight the New York proposal included the Grocery Manufacturers Association, The National Grocers Association, the American Beverage Association and the Snack Food Association.

The candy lobby is equally as great, Simon notes in a 2012 report "Food Stamps: Follow the Money." She notes the candy lobby even worries children may be deprived.

Rules debunk rumors on SNAP purchases

There is some public confusion over what are eligible food items on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

"You shouldn't be able to buy cigarettes with food stamps," said Jeff Glendening state director of Americans for Prosperity.

Actually, a person can't buy cigarettes, according to the USDA Food and Nutrition Services. While some people receiving food assistance might smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol and have lots of hungry cats to feed, those items can't be purchased with food stamps. Yet, as state and national officials note, there is a black market where individuals sell their food stamps for cash, alcohol or cigarettes and, as one on food stamps admitted about his past - drugs.

Here is what households can buy with SNAP benefits under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008: Foods for the household to eat, such as: breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish and poultry, and dairy products, seeds and plants which produce food for the household to eat.

In some areas, restaurants can be authorized to accept SNAP benefits from qualified homeless, elderly, or disabled people in exchange for low-cost meals.

Here is what households cannot use SNAP benefits to buy:

Beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes or tobacco; any nonfood items, such as: pet foods, soaps, grooming items, cosmetics, paper products, household supplies, vitamins and medicines; food that will be eaten in the store and hot foods.

In an interview with The News, Glendening stated the food stamp program is broken and should be separated from the Farm Bill. Loopholes and fraudulent use of the program by recipients are two big issues that concern him.

"I think you could safely say it is a broken program. Unfortunately, you have a number of loopholes that are helping people who aren't truly in need and are not truly struggling," Glendening said.

Soft drinks, candy, cookies, snack crackers, and ice cream are food items and are eligible items for purchase under SNAP. Seafood, steak, and bakery cakes are also food items and are also eligible items.

Since the current definition of food is a specific part of the act, any change to this definition would require action by a member of Congress. Several times in the history of SNAP, Congress had considered placing limits on the types of food that could be purchased with program benefits. However, they concluded that designating foods as luxury or non-nutritious would be administratively costly and burdensome.

For more information go to <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

- Kathy Hanks



benefits were redeemed in supermarkets and superstores in 2012. Wal-Mart stores, which also lobbies on SNAP - is no doubt one of the top for SNAP receipts. According to a Tulsa World story, Oklahoma Wal-Mart stores received \$506 million in SNAP receipts between mid-2009 to early 2011. The newspaper received the data

from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

Repeated Freedom of Information Act requests by The News during the past several years to obtain SNAP spending data in Kansas from the USDA have been denied. Similar requests to obtain the data from the Kansas Department of Children and Families ended with a statement that the information should be obtained from the USDA.

Others in the top 10 for farm bill lobbying include: National Cable and Telecommunications Association, International Dairy Foods Association, Comcast Corp, American Sugar Alliance, Monsanto, Purdue University, Grocery Manufacturers Association, Dairy Farmers of America.

- Amy Bickel

Map shows areas of longstanding poverty in Kansas

From "Ask Hutch"

For the past month, Kathy Hanks and I have been working on a series looking at the food stamp side of the farm bill. Often, I write about how the 80-year-old legislation affects Kansas agriculture, but I knew little about how it affects those who rely on the assistance to purchase groceries for their families.

We decided to put a face to Kansas food stamps.

On Saturday, I received this question about an issue we did not address in our stories. The question references a part

of the state that we typically do not cover.

Q: In the Saturday, Feb. 1 paper, there was a map of food stamp recipients. Why is the southeast corner of the state so dependent on food stamps?

Saturday's paper included a map made by Ken Stephens and Jim Heck that showed the percentage of residents on food stamps in each Kansas county. The data we used, from the Kansas Department for Children and Families, showed most counties in the southeast

corner had a higher percentage on food stamps than the rest of the state. Montgomery County, for example, has 17.4 percent of the population using food stamps. That's higher than urban Sedgwick County, where just over 16 percent of the population is getting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program dollars.

The southeast Kansas area, which once had a large economy centered on mining, has a higher rate of generational poverty, according to a report by the Sunflower Foundation.

Residents of Crawford and Cherokee counties have among the lowest per

capita incomes of any areas of the state, the report said. Moreover, it's not simply an economic downturn, Krista Postai, a native of Pittsburg who is the chief executive officer for the Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas, said in the report.

"We're talking about generational poverty; 100 years of poverty," Postai said. "What's different about this kind of poverty is that people do not hope for anything different. But I am proud to say we are bringing hope."

- Amy Bickel

COVERING THE BETTER PART OF KANSAS

THE HUTCHINSON NEWS

Interview takes a turn for the worse

"Be Kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle," Philo of Alexandria

Leaving the woman's home, Amy Bickel and I thought we had found the perfect face to portray the food stamp series.

We were excited to tell her story after listening for over an hour as she told us how she stretched the \$236 her family of three received from SNAP all the way to the end of the month. She came across as the perfect example of someone trying to better herself in society after a few rough patches, including divorce.

This lady had big dreams to become a lawyer, get an MBA and eventually start her own nonprofit.

She also had great ideas, sharing how she could prepare a meal by planning, and making each dime count. Things others took for granted, she thought through. She managed by using brand and store coupons and other online coupon offers, scoping out bargains.

She could fix a meal for three, spending only \$2, and her kids ate it. Despite her scrimping, she was able to find bargains so they had the latest technological toys and would never run out of shampoo.

It helped that she had a Pell grant, though still eight years into her studies at Hutchinson Community College, currently all online. Between Pell, SNAP, Low Economic Energy Assistance, an adjusted rent of \$34 and her daughter's disability payments, she managed.

Searching for the faces of food stamps should have been easy to find in Reno County with 8,494 people locally receiving money from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Finding people brave enough to share their stories was the hard part. Going to the soup kitchen or the

Friendship Meals at the Salvation Army were places to begin. But here was a 32-year-old mother trying to make it, and she was so willing to talk with us.

She was highly excitable as she shared how sometimes trying to make the right choices at the store gave her chest pains. Would it be cheaper to purchase this brand or that? She was always on the look out for a savings. That's how she survived.

"If it's not on sale, we don't buy it," she said. "I always research before I buy something. I have to figure out how to make the money last."

She even agreed to go shopping with me and a photographer so we could see how she cost compared and used the Vision card.

"Yea! Shopping," she said happily, when I called the night before to confirm what time I would pick her up at her home.

The next morning a photographer went ahead to the store and I dropped by her townhouse to get her. I knocked and she didn't answer. I knocked harder thinking maybe she was asleep. Then I called her, but her cellphone was turned off.

I pounded on her door, and then called again to no avail. One more knock on the door, and I heard a nasty voice shout "Go away."

Then the door opened and a man stood there saying the woman I was looking for was gone.

"But, who did I just hear?" I asked



They were just getting ready to do something in there the manager said. She was uncomfortable about it. I was angry. We had been duped.

"That was someone else," he said. "She left with a friend. I'll tell her you were here."

Then he slammed the door.

I was stunned. She had been excited about shopping. Maybe something bad was happening in the apartment? I went to the manager of the apartment complex. She and a maintenance man went to check. The woman was indeed inside with several friends. She told the manager she wasn't going shopping with me so I could watch her spend money on her Vision card.

They were just getting ready to do something in there the manager said. She was uncomfortable about it.

I was angry. We had been duped.

In retrospect we did have doubts about her. For example, how can anyone get a Pell grant while spending eight years in junior college and why would the government allow it?

Does this coupon clipping, frugal, mom know how to play the system? Are her big dreams real? I don't know what to believe. Some might see her as a parasite on society. Others might feel sympathy and want to mentor her. A friend told me that every adult in this situation has something in their background that brought them to this point in life.

One thing is certain, while it might sound like the same story heard over and over, everyone is different and there is no perfect face of food stamps.

Compassion, not judgment, should define food stamp debate

For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Matthew 25: 35-40

The Faces of Food stamps are many.

Sometimes those faces are of a working family struggling to stay afloat in an increasingly difficult economy. Sometimes, those faces are of the disabled, who because of misfortune or misjudgment are not able to provide for themselves. Sometimes it's the face of a child, and sometimes it's the face of a widowed grandmother.

And, yes, sometimes, the faces of food stamps are those of the afflicted and addicted, who have learned through the years to treat a compassionate social safety net as a game and a way of life.

But every one is the face of a person, the least of these of which Jesus spoke.

The fortunate among us - whose lives have fallen neatly in place, who have held on to our health and our hopes for the future - cannot control the actions, desires or outcomes of another, even if we think it just. We can't make another's choices, nor can we hold as ransom another's life if they don't conform to our ideals.

We can choose, however, to view those faces of food stamps with compassion or contempt.

With compassion, we offer help without judgment and assistance without the expectation of favor. We offer a

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path to a better life, with the hope that another will accept it freely.

With judgment, we offer neglect, shame and condemnation. We refuse to lay out a road to hope and prosperity, but instead outline what we will require to in order to win our love and approval.

Will a compassionate heart toward the hungry, the thirsty and the sick lead some to exploit our kindness? Almost certainly, but it is better than the caustic effect of a view tainted with hatred, ownership and disdain of our country's weakest people.

Last weekend, The News explored the issue of food stamps, as well as the people who rely on the food program to meet their basic needs. The stories shined a light on both the merits and faults of the program, and on the people for whom food stamps is a daily fact of life.

Some argue the food stamp program is broken, that too many people game the system and in the process lose their motivation to work. Others argue the program is perfectly effective and should continue in its current form. Neither view is completely right, and the solution - if there's one at all - won't be simple or easy.

But maybe the discussion can begin with recognition that the debate over food stamps isn't a debate about policy, nor should it be a debate about whether the weak should comply with demands of the strong.

The issue of food stamps is a debate about faces and the people behind them.

It's about people who suffer misfortune, who lack the capacity to work, who aren't as strong, fit, intelligent, educated, charismatic or as mindful as most of us.

It's about people who have grown up poor and know no other way to survive. It's about people who have experienced trauma or who have made bad decisions for which they've spent their whole lives paying.

It's about people born with severe illnesses or people in debilitating car accidents. It's about people born to broken and tormented families or in a part of the country that suffers from chronic poverty.

And it's about people who see welfare as a better hope than work.

If we remove judgment, however, and view the issue of food stamps through the lens of people, maybe we begin to examine the underlying problem we originally set out to solve, which is how 47 million people in the richest country on earth can be so grossly excluded from the nation's prosperity that they must rely on the public's mercy for food.

So long as the debate is founded in judgment of another's decisions or lifestyle, the food stamp program never will fully serve as a tool to help the poor attain self-sufficiency. Instead of finding ways to help more people find a way to a better life, we'll continue to piously shake our heads in shame and disapproval at the faces of those whose lives don't mirror our own.

A conversation that begins with compassion, however, compels us to ask how we can best help and serve the less fortunate. A compassionate view moves us away from inflammatory language that reduces our brethren to something less than human and instead starts with the biblical idea that we should freely offer an open hand to the poor in our land.

The Faces of Food Stamps are many, yet it's worth pausing long enough to consider that one of those faces could be ours, our children, our friends or our families. Then we can rejoice for what we have and let compassion guide our decisions about how best to help the least of these.

- Jason Probst