

Food Insecurity and Food Stamps

"There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

-- Mahatma Gandhi, political and spiritual leader of India (1869-1948)

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

-- President Dwight Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States during 1953-1961

"A hungry man is not a free man."

-- Adlai Stevenson, U.S. politician who competed for President against Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956

As of November 2007, our nation's population exceeds 303 million, and there are now just over 6 million Tennesseans. Most Americans have enough to eat, yet many adults – and even more children – are what the federal government calls "food insecure."

Q. What does "food insecure" mean?

"Food insecure" is a term for persons who do not have adequate food to meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. Food insecurity means that a family does not have access at all times to adequate food for an active, healthy life.

Q. Is there much food insecurity in Tennessee?

Yes. USDA figures show that during 2004 to 2006, about 12.5 percent of Tennesseans (above the U.S. average of 11.3 percent) experienced food insecurity.

This means that about 1 out of 8 Tennesseans experience hunger or food insecurity – and a good many of those are children. In Tennessee, about 26 percent of all children receive food stamps. Still, however, too many children often go to bed hungry.

Q. What are food stamps?

The United States has a food stamps program that helps eligible persons buy food in grocery stores. Each state manages its own food stamps program.

Food stamps are help from the government to buy most foods in grocery stores. Food stamps are only for food. They cannot be used to buy soap or cleaning supplies, beer, diapers, or pet food.

Q. Who manages the food stamps program in Tennessee?

The DHS (Department of Human Services) has an office in each Tennessee county. Each office issues and accepts food stamp applications. DHS staff members can help fill out applications.

Q. Who can apply to get food stamps in Tennessee?

Anyone can apply – whether working or not, whether they have children or not, and whether they have a home or are homeless. Their income and savings must be below a certain amount, but certain deductions can make them eligible. Applicants must live in Tennessee and must be U.S. citizens or eligible legal immigrants. Some legal aliens cannot get food stamps.

Q. Are there work requirements to be eligible for food stamps?

Yes. Applicants who are able-bodied and between 16 and 59 years old must register for work, must participate in the Employment and Training Program if offered, must accept offers of employment, and cannot quit a job. DHS does not apply this work rule to adults who are disabled.

Q. Can a student get food stamps?

Maybe. The student must be between 18 and 49 and must be enrolled at least half-time in a college, university, or vocational or technical school. Most college students must be working 20 hours per week, or enrolled in work-study, or caring for young dependents, or receiving Families First.

Q. How can a person find out if he or she can get food stamps?

To apply, persons should go to the local DHS office. The Family Assistance Help Line at 1-888-863-6178 can give the phone number of the nearest office. It's a free call.

by Jim Hawkins, Managing Attorney, Gallatin office, Legal Aid Society

Note: This column is not intended to take the place of legal advice. All cases are different and need individual attention. Consult with a private attorney of your choice to review the facts and law specific to your case.

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