
Iowa Fiscal Partnership

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Report Offers Portrait of Food Need in NE Iowa Burdens for Nonprofits Seen if Federal Services are Slashed

WATERLOO, Iowa (June 6, 2005) – One in 11 Iowans is “food insecure,” creating a demand for food assistance that government alone does not meet and that will present new challenges for nonprofit organizations if Congress cuts federal help, a new report illustrates.

The report, “Hunger in the Heartland,” examines demand for food assistance at food pantries served by the Northeast Iowa Food Bank in Waterloo. The nonpartisan Iowa Fiscal Partnership (IFP) released the report Monday as food providers prepared for Tuesday’s observance of National Hunger Awareness Day.

“Alongside government programs, these pantries are the front line in the battle against hunger. This battle exists even in the agricultural abundance of America’s heartland,” said Maureen Berner, a University of Northern Iowa political science professor who conducted the study for the nonpartisan IFP.

Noting that government and nonprofits have shared the duty of helping America’s hungry over the past 40 years, her report found stable or increasing demand for help from nonprofits, and a need for both short-term and long-term help for Northeast Iowa families.

Berner’s report noted over 9 percent of Iowans were “food insecure,” lacking access to sufficient food at all times, while 3 percent were “hungry,” a recurrent lack of access that could lead to malnutrition. She also noted that more than 100,000 Iowa children and 100,000 Iowa adults receive government food assistance each year, and that nonprofit food banks serving Iowans distributed over 10 million pounds of food in the past year.

Berner surveyed about 1,200 clients receiving help from July through mid-April at the Cedar Valley Food Pantry in Waterloo, where demand has nearly doubled in four years. Of those responding:

- One in four was employed.
- One in four received Social Security benefits.
- Four in 10 received Food Stamps.
- One in five sought help at the time of an unexpected household expense.
- Three in 10 seeking emergency assistance had just lost a job.

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Many clients also cited financial pressures for their families besides putting food on the table. Shelter costs topped the list for both emergency and more frequent pantry clients – the majority of whom rent their living space – almost half citing rent or mortgage costs and 4 in 10 citing utility bills. Prescription costs were cited by almost 1 in 4 and medical bills by almost 1 in 5.

“Many Iowa families face multiple financial pressures, and the hungry will not go away,” Berner said. “If Food Stamps or other government food assistance is cut, local nonprofits inevitably would be given a bigger burden, regardless of whether they have the resources and capacity to accept it.”

Food Stamps are expected to be the target of cuts in budget negotiations in Washington this summer. A recently passed budget resolution would require \$3 billion in cuts in mandatory services under jurisdiction of the Senate Agriculture Committee, including Food Stamps. Other nutrition programs, such as nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), also could face cuts.

David Osterberg, executive director of the Iowa Policy Project, said decisions about reductions in federal nutrition assistance must take the consequences into account.

“Congress should not cut food assistance without an assurance that the private sector can handle a greater burden,” Osterberg said. “This is not something where we can just ‘let the chips fall.’ That is just too risky with people’s lives.”

The report follows the release of four fact sheets examining food security and hunger in Iowa and the nation, prepared as part of the report. All of the information is available at the Iowa Fiscal Partnership website <http://www.iowafiscal.org>. The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a joint budget and policy analysis initiative of two nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations, the Mount Vernon-based Iowa Policy Project, and the Des Moines-based Child & Family Policy Center.

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