

## LOCAL NEWS

# 'They are terrified': Community assistance organizations brace for impacts of SNAP shutoff



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LOWELL — With a cutoff of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and fuel assistance benefits set for Saturday, local organizations are scrambling to meet what is expected to be a sharp increase in demand for assistance.

SNAP provides food assistance to more than 40 million Americans across the country, and about 27% of Lowell residents rely on the program. Last week the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a statement saying SNAP benefits would not be distributed Nov. 1 due to the ongoing government shutdown, now one month old.

The USDA statement, which is still posted on the [department's website](#), blamed Senate Democrats for not voting for the Republican funding proposal. Partisan statements by departments like the USDA and other agencies explicitly blaming Democrats for the shutdown may be a violation of the Hatch Act.

With little hope for a turnaround before Nov. 1, organizations like the Merrimack Valley Food Bank have been “overwhelmed with calls, emails, and people walking in our front door.”

“They are terrified. People have been telling us that they don’t know where to turn, or how they will be able to feed their kids in November if SNAP benefits don’t go out. One woman told our staff member that she was willing to walk anywhere to get food for her kids,” said MVFB spokesperson Kelly Proulx in an email to The Sun Thursday morning. “We’ve never seen so many people reaching out, and it’s so hard that we don’t have a good answer for them. Our staff have even been receiving contacts through their personal social media from acquaintances who know they work here and have friends or family who are scared and desperate. It’s coming from everywhere.”

MVFB serves more than 100 member agencies with their own food pantries already, but now they said they are getting calls from other such organizations hoping to become MVFB clients.

“Unfortunately we’ve had to turn those organizations away, because with the increased demand looming over the coming weeks we anticipate a struggle to even meet the needs of our existing members,” said Proulx.

MVFB serves about 70,000 people each month at the most, but between the communities it serves in Middlesex and Essex counties, about 285,000 people rely on SNAP benefits they may no longer have access to this weekend.

“If those benefits don’t go out, that many more people could be seeking emergency food from pantries and meals programs. That’s more than quadruple the number of people we typically serve – it just isn’t feasible that any organization could fill that gap,” said Proulx.

Proulx said there is real concern that there will not be enough supply among Massachusetts food banks to meet the demand created by the loss of SNAP benefits, but they are tapping into reserve funds and looking to purchase more food from a wider pool of grocery stores, and a citywide donation drive is being held next weekend.

“But honestly, all of this is a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of food that SNAP can provide. For every meal provided by a food bank nationwide, SNAP provides nine meals. We are going to do as much as we can, for as many people as we can, but the reality is that it won’t be enough,” said Proulx. “SNAP is our nation’s most effective anti-hunger program. It also provides a huge economic benefit for local grocers and food retailers, generating more than \$1.50 in economic activity for every \$1 spent on the program.”

This will cause “a ripple effect,” Proulx said, which she said will be felt by everyone, even people who do not rely on these benefits.

“That’s why we want to emphasize how important it is that the federal government issues those benefits even if the shutdown continues, and that the State must step in if the federal government does not,” said Proulx.

MVFB offers a schedule for local pantries and a list of food assistance resources on its website, and Proulx also pointed to Project Bread’s hotline at 1-800-645-8333 if one is struggling to find a pantry.

In a virtual press conference Thursday morning with leaders of local community assistance agencies in communities like Lowell, Fitchburg, Lawrence, Haverhill and Marlboro, U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan said the Trump administration’s cutting off programs like SNAP and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a deliberate choice.

“To be absolutely clear, these are choices, choices made deliberately to inflict the maximum amount of suffering on the American people. Choices made to hold families hostage in an attempt to pressure Democrats in Congress into rubberstamping Trump’s extreme agenda,” said Trahan. “But that agenda is failing hardworking families here in Massachusetts and across our country. Prices are up across the board on groceries, medication, utilities and everything in between, and now families are staring down the barrel of a Republican-caused health care price-hike that could hit as soon as the end of this year with more than 20 million Americans seeing their premiums skyrocket.”

Among the organizations who joined Trahan in the press conference was Lowell’s Community Teamwork Inc.

CTI CEO Carl Howell said his organization has received heating assistance applications from 6,000 households ahead of the colder months, with most of those coming in the last couple of weeks.

“Without federal funding, there is nothing for us to do. These are not just numbers, these are homes that will go cold next week,” said Howell. “I need you to understand that LIHEAP is more than a lifeline for our families ... This is an economic stabilizer for our community.”

Howell and others at the press conference noted the benefits of LIHEAP funding to the local economy, with over \$9 million flowing to 70 local energy vendors last year through the program and CTI.

“These dollars kept paychecks coming, kept businesses open, and most importantly kept families safe,” said Howell. “If that flow of funding stops, the impact ripples through every neighborhood. It means unpaid invoices, lost wages and small business owners facing layoffs, and at the very same time families are struggling to stay warm.”

Fitchburg-based Making Opportunity Count provides a variety of services to help lift people and families out of poverty. CEO Kevin Reed said at the press conference his organization was able to help people in areas like education, health care and employment, but now they find themselves in “conversations about the most basic needs folks need to have met to not be freezing in their homes.”

“We can’t possibly pursue these really critical and important opportunities for folks to better their lives, to better our communities if we are stuck at square one again,” said Reed. “We continue to deal with the reality that we can’t trust Washington, we can’t trust this administration, as much as we attempted to advance trust with them a build a better partnership, to pay their bills for services in which they asked us to provide to our communities.”

When asked about the likelihood of the food and fuel assistance programs not being cut off this weekend, Trahan cited a contingency fund in place that the Trump administration could use to continue the funding for SNAP.

“They could tap into it today and make sure families can continue to receive their food assistance that they need well into November, but they are choosing not to do that,” said Trahan, noting that Massachusetts Attorney General Andrea Campbell and other state AGs are suing to get those funds released.

As far as LIHEAP, Trahan said she is penning a letter demanding information on what funds remain available for disbursement for home energy assistance. She also noted President Trump’s attempt to fire the entire LIHEAP board amid the shutdown.

“Families need that assistance, small businesses need that assistance, and we are going to do everything we can to help them get it, including seeing what emergency contingency funds are available that could be distributed today or on Saturday,” said Trahan.

On Thursday morning, Gov. Maura Healey announced the creation of SNAP Freeze, a resource hub for families who lost their food assistance benefits to get the help they need. The state is also working to make pre-planned payments to food banks and local assistance organizations earlier than originally planned. The Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program distributes \$4 million to food banks across the state monthly, and Healey is seeking to advance legislation to double that amount.

“Starting Saturday, more than one million Massachusetts residents and 42 million people nationwide will be at immediate risk of hunger because President Trump is freezing SNAP benefits. These are children, seniors, people with disabilities and veterans. They are your friends, family and neighbors,” Healey said in a statement Thursday morning. “Massachusetts is a place where people step up when their neighbors are in need, and I want to make sure that people who need help know where to get it, and that those who want to help know what they can do. We are glad that we are able to advance this funding that we secured with the Legislature to help our food banks meet the needs of our communities during this challenging time, and we thank everyone who has already contributed. President Trump needs to release the billions of dollars in USDA funds that he is holding back and could use to continue SNAP.”

During Thursday’s session, the five-member Republican caucus in the state Legislature pressed Healey and the Democratic majority to go even further with the state stepping in amid the federal lapse.

“Our ask to them ... is to find from available revenues an appropriation to prevent the harm that would be caused with regard to a lapse in SNAP benefits,” Minority Leader Bruce Tarr said, referencing the conference committee now tasked with negotiating the final fiscal 2025 closeout budget. “A temporary exposure, not permanent, a significant but not insurmountable exposure, a subject that is already addressed in the Senate version of the closeout supplemental budget and something I would challenge anyone to say does not reflect a humanitarian crisis if the need is not met.”

*Material from State House News Service was used in this report.*