

HOWARD COUNTY

Howard County residents face ‘hunger cliff’ with end to pandemic-era emergency food aid

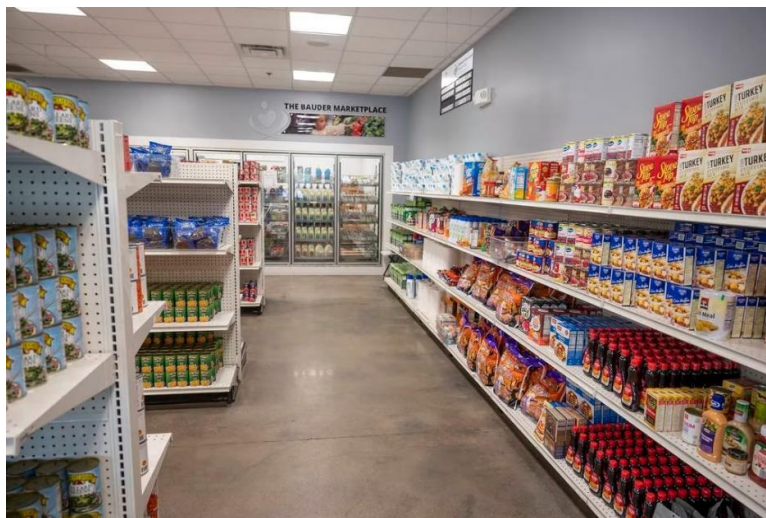
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Baltimore Sun Media
Mar 03, 2023 at 6:00 am

Major cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program went into effect on Wednesday, impacting thousands of Howard County families struggling with food insecurity.

The end to pandemic-era emergency SNAP allotments will affect more than 340,000 Marylanders and see average SNAP benefits for participants fall to \$6 per day, according to the Food Research and Action Center. The center said the state is set to lose \$69 million in federal funds per month as a result of the cuts.

“All of the families that were on SNAP really relied on [the allotments],” said J.D. Robinson, an anti-hunger program coordinator at Maryland Hunger Solutions, a nonprofit that raises awareness for food insecurity across the state. “This boost meant that they were able to keep food on the table, they weren’t having to juggle between paying utility bills, making ends meet with their rent.”

An Urban Institute study found that emergency allotments helped keep 4.2 million people out of poverty in 2021 and reduced childhood poverty by 14% in states with the benefits. The report said that poverty reduction was greatest for Black and Latino SNAP recipients.



Shelves and freezers stocked with free food at the Community Action Council of Howard County's food bank in Columbia. The food bank and 15 partner pantries serve county residents at or below 150% of federal poverty guidelines. (Courtesy Howard County Government)

As part of its December spending bill, Congress voted to end the allotments a month early, in return for funding for summer meals programs for low-income students. The benefits were initially set to expire in April, although 17 states had already opted to end their allotments before the end of 2022.

Columbia resident and mother of four Wanda Medina said she was appalled when she heard the allotments were coming to an end. With her family's monthly SNAP benefits falling from \$598 to \$422 as a result, she's hoping to pick up more work as a Spanish language interpreter, despite knowing it will mean more time away from her kids.

"How can one individual eat with let's say \$100 a month?" said Medina, 44. "It's almost impossible."

Medina knows other single mothers who she says will be impacted even harder as the cuts take effect.

"A lot of them have lost their jobs over COVID," Medina said. "It's going to be catastrophic in a way for families like that."

Although local advocates and food pantries sprang into action after the cuts were announced, experts warn they won't be able to fill the gap and residents will be left facing a "hunger cliff." SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, provide nine times the number of meals as food bank networks, according to Feeding America.

"We're supposed to be supplemental," said Carrie Ross, director of the Howard County Food Bank. "The way we work is we advocate for everybody to have SNAP benefits, use those first and then come to us to get through the month."

In addition to its primary Columbia food bank, the Community Action Council of Howard County also oversees 15 partner pantries at schools, faith-based organizations and nonprofits. All locations provide free food to participating residents, who must be at or below 150% of the federal poverty line.

With allotments ending and inflation still hitting families hard, Ross said that the food bank might become some Howard residents' only source of food as cuts take effect this month. The bank is teaching clients ways to make food last longer, such as freezing bread and meats.

"We're doing our best," Ross said. "A lot of people are scared, and we just have to see where we go from here."

Robinson says that his organization has been conducting benefit "checkups" with Marylanders to ensure they're accurately reporting their income to the state and their SNAP allotments are calculated accurately.

He also hopes that the Maryland General Assembly takes action and passes legislation similar to a New Jersey bill that set the state's minimum monthly SNAP benefits at \$95 per household. In Maryland, the SNAP minimum is now \$23 a month for households.

Until more federal aid or legislative action is approved, Medina wants to raise awareness for county families that depended on the allotments and now face uncertainty.

"We need to make a little bit of noise and we need to get to know our community," she said. "There could be so many things that can be done to raise food, at least for these people that have none."

To learn more about food assistance in Howard County, visit: <https://cac-hc.org/food-assistance/>.