



## The Facts about SNAP and Nutrition

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Two State Senators representing districts in the North Country recently introduced bills in Albany to make changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called food stamps).

Senator Patty Ritchie's bill would prevent the use of food stamps, or EBT benefits, to buy junk food, like soda and candy, or luxury items, like steak and lobster.

Senator Joseph Griffo's proposal says that SNAP cannot be used at liquor stores, casinos, strip clubs, and tobacco shops. It also says SNAP cannot be used for tattoos and bail and limits the amount of the SNAP benefit that can be withdrawn as cash.

It may seem surprising that neither of these elected officials can speak accurately about this important nutrition program. For example:

- The law already prohibits the use of SNAP for everything listed in Senator Griffo's bill.
- SNAP benefits can never be withdrawn as cash.
- And, the program is not called food stamps, nor is it called EBT. The program that helps low-income families and seniors purchase food is called the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** or **SNAP** for short. SNAP benefits do come on a card called an Electronic Benefit Transfer or EBT card. However, other benefits are also delivered via an EBT card, so it is not fair to assume that because someone has an EBT card that they are making use of SNAP benefits.

Thinking about maximizing nutrition for the buck, it might be easy to jump on the "no steak and lobster" bandwagon. But do we really think people living on limited budgets are buying that much steak and lobster? All the research tells us that SNAP recipients get about the same nutrition per dollar spent, or even slightly better than the typical American.

If nutrition is what we really care about, a proven method to get SNAP households consuming more fresh fruits and vegetables is by providing incentives, like the State of New York's *Fresh Connect* program which provides an additional \$2 worth of produce at area farmers markets for every \$5 in SNAP benefits used at the market. This program is truly win-win, not only helping low-income families have better nutrition, but also supporting our local farmers. GardenShare makes the use of SNAP benefits available at all of our County's farmers markets and offers these kinds of incentives.

Three questions these proposals raise for me:

- First, who will be the "food police?" If we prohibit steak, does that mean someone can't buy a chuck steak when it's on sale cheaper than hamburger? In my work running a large food bank in Connecticut, I once had a woman tell me we should not give bread to poor

people because it causes diabetes! Do we want to someone with those kinds of views in charge? Senator Ritchie listed granola bars as a healthy choice, but would ban candy bars. The typical granola bar in the store is nothing but a candy bar in disguise. Why would one be allowed and not the other? Even if we can find a way to make the list of what's allowed and not allowed, how does a grocery store, which typically has more than 40,000 separate items in stock, even keep track?

- Second, since current laws prevent SNAP funds from being used on non-food items, why would a legislator waste his time and the taxpayers' money to make something illegal when it's already illegal?
- Finally, why do state legislators think they can make changes to a federal program?

Here are some *real* facts about SNAP

- 40% of SNAP households have someone who is employed, but not making enough to support his or her family.
- 76% of all SNAP benefits go to households with children,
- 12% of all SNAP goes to households with disabled persons
- 10% of SNAP benefits are distributed to households with seniors.
- More than 15,000 St. Lawrence County residents receive SNAP benefits. Considering the poverty rate in the County, it's likely that many more are eligible and not yet signed up with the program.

You can make a difference by expressing your opinion to your State Senator. Go to <https://www.nysenate.gov/find-my-senator> and enter your address to find out the name of your senator and to get his or her contact information.

Learn more about GardenShare's work to make the farmers markets available to all residents at [www.gardenshare.org](http://www.gardenshare.org) . GardenShare is currently recruiting volunteers to support this work at the farmers markets. Contact them at [info@gardenshare.org](mailto:info@gardenshare.org) or call 261-8054 if you're interested in helping.

Additional links to learn more about food assistance

**SNAP in NY:** <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/snap/>

**USDA:**

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

**Food Research and Action Center:**

<http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/snapfood-stamps>