Thinking Back to My Food Stamp Days

Posted At : December 14, 2009 3:38 PM | Posted By : Food Bank Staff
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by Paul Hernandez

According to a recent New York Times article, more and more Americans are taking part in the Food Stamp Program (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) — both because there is more need during this enduring recession, and because the stigma attached this resource has lessened.

When I was growing up, my family received food stamps for many years. At the time, I felt ashamed — not only because food stamps signified that we were poor, which we were, but also because it was unavoidably clear to anyone around when we used our food stamps. At the time, there were only certain items that you could buy with food stamps; at the same time the list of acceptable items was ambiguous. While generic cereals might be alright, brand name cereal might not. And, most times, you wouldn't find out until you got to the cashier. I can tell you, there's nothing worse than being a young teenager at your small-town grocery store when the checkout lady loudly announces , "You can't buy diapers with food stamps."

And, while food stamps are now provided on a card that you can swipe at the check out just like a typical debit card, at the time food stamps were provided in a packet that made them look like Monopoly money. Each stamp had a specific dollar value. And, as I recollect, stores had to give you change in real money and they often wouldn't give more than one dollar worth of change. As a result, we had to keep your total within a dollar of the amount of food stamps you had, meaning that some months we ran out of ones or fives and would either have to leave some items at the register or run and grab some extra items just to bump up our total. I remember once buying an extra fifteen packages of gum so we could still get all the items we needed.

Much of that has changed today, and the food stamp program is growing because of it. Perhaps it's time for people who stigmatize the program to rethink their preconceptions, especially those who qualify for but aren't receiving food stamps. The Food Bank's Food Stamp Outreach Program helps to connect qualified people with food stamps, and along the way works hard to reduce the stigma associated with accepting this benefit — essential for so many individuals and families. I know that if I needed food stamps today, I wouldn't hesitate to apply, Monopoly money or no.

Meet other Americans who benefit from food stamps, many of whom have struggled with the decision to accept help, in the New York Times's "Food Stamp Use Soars, and Stigma Fades."

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/29/us/29foodstamps.html?_r=1&em.