

Lewis Central
bond placed on
ballot

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programs aid
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Saturday, July 13, 2024

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STATE FACES HUNGER CRISIS

1 IN 9 IOWANS HUNGRY



ANDREW SMITH, THE NONPAREIL

Adelynn Flom grabs granola for lunch at Longfellow Elementary School on Friday, July 5, 2024. Flom took part in the summer lunch program with her sister and others that attend Monika Carroll's in-home daycare.

Summer programs helping food insecure families

ANDREW SMITH
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Hunger in Iowa is increasing, leaving local food pantries and other providers stretched. More than 344,000 Iowa residents, about 10.8% of the state's population, face food insecurity, according to data released by Feeding America, a national nonprofit network of food banks.


Food Bank for the Heartland, which serves southwest Iowa and much of Nebraska, said the rate of hunger in Iowa was 1 in 13 in last year's assessment. The food insecurity rate among children jumped by 63.8% — leaving 1 in 6 children in Iowa facing hunger.

The food bank, in a joint statement with the Food Bank of Lincoln in Nebraska, said prolonged inflation and higher costs have driven a 44% increase in food insecurity in Iowa since 2019.

Pottwattamie County's food insecurity rates are up more than 36%, with 1 in 9 county residents challenged by hunger, according to Food Bank for the Heartland. Children in the county share a similar rate of hunger seen statewide.

The rise in need has continued growing since pandemic-era benefits were dropped, which was followed by price increases at grocery stores that exceeded the rate of inflation.

"Iowa is facing a crisis situation as it relates to hunger and food insecurity," Luke Elzinga, board chair of the Iowa Hunger Coalition, said in a news release. "No matter where you look in the state of Iowa — urban, suburban, and rural areas — the story is the same."

 **VIEW:** For video and additional photos, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. [NEWSVU](#)

Summer EBT benefits rejected

With hunger on the rise, Gov. Kim Reynolds announced late last year that Iowa would not participate in a federal program that gives \$40 per month for each child in a low-income family to help with food costs while school is out for the summer.

Ultimately, a dozen other states with Republican governors opted out of the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children program, more often called Summer EBT, which the USDA also refers to as SUN Bucks.

"Federal COVID-era cash benefit programs are not sustainable and don't provide long-term solutions for the issues impacting children and families," Reynolds said in a news release at the time. "An EBT card does nothing to promote nutrition at a time when childhood obesity has become an epidemic."

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Glenwood gears up for RAGBRAI, needs volunteers

TIM ROHWER
Council Bluffs Nonpareil

Final preparations are in high gear in Glenwood as officials and volunteers get ready to host the start of this year's RAGBRAI.

Jennie Davis, executive director of the Mills County Chamber of Commerce, told The Nonpareil on Thursday that organizers are training volunteers, organizing parking passes, cleaning and decorating the town, managing calls from residents, businesses and riders, and other logistics.

FastSigns of Council Bluffs made an in-kind donation of signage for the event.

RAGBRAI — which stands for The Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa — is the oldest, largest and longest multiday bicycle touring event in the world.

Traditionally, it begins in a community on the west side of the state, then goes east to a site along the Mississippi River. It generally lasts eight days and attracts bike riders from near and far.

Glenwood, which was chosen as this year's starting point, expects some 20,000 riders coming in next Saturday — dubbed Day Zero — for a variety of community events, prior to the next day's start, Davis said.

In preparation for the downtown expo, nearly 200 people have come forth for volunteer duties, although more are still needed, she said.

"We deeply appreciate the nearly 200 volunteers who have committed to supporting us next Saturday," Davis said. "Our volunteers come from local areas, surrounding communities, school and nonprofit groups, as well as from outside law enforcement, Offutt Air Force Base, and Google."

Nevertheless, an additional 100 volunteers — or more — are still needed.

"There are roles for everyone, from assisting with Friday's set-up, to staffing information centers, handling ID and ticket sales, serving beverages, and assisting with Sunday's clean-up," Davis said.

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Weather
Hot and humid
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FORECAST • A10



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Hunger

From A1

Food pantries and antihunger advocates decried the decision.

Initially, Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen announced a similar decision, but he changed his mind about the U.S. Department of Agriculture program after a group of school-children spoke to the governor about being hungry.

The head of USDA recently criticized Reynolds’ decision during a June 28 visit to Girls Inc. in Omaha.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack spoke with a panel of local professionals impacted by USDA’s summer nutrition program. Girls Inc. provides programming to educate and assist girls, and it serves as a summer food distribution location in partnership with USDA — providing subsidized meals to children at no charge.

The USDA program can also be found in communities across Iowa, and the state launched a \$900,000 grant program through the Iowa Department of Education this spring to expanding summer food distribution sites at schools, churches and other locations.

Vilsack, who served as governor of Iowa from 1999 to 2007, nevertheless criticized Reynolds’ decision to decline the Summer EBT funding.

“I would like you to export your vibes across the border so that my home state gets the message,” Vilsack said. “You folks are providing the example. ... You’re taking care of the children.”

The Summer EBT program, or SUN Bucks, provides an additional \$40 per month between May 16 and Aug. 31. The \$29 million in funding for Iowa would have cost the state an estimated \$2.2 million in administrative costs.

Nebraska opted into Summer EBT, bringing the Cornhusker State about \$18 million in funding, in mid-February. Initially, Pillen said he didn’t “believe in welfare” as the reason for rejecting the funding in late 2023.

“I do appreciate (Pillen’s) willingness to listen and understand that this isn’t a welfare program. This is in the best interest of kids and, at the end of the day, we all benefit from that,” Vilsack said. “Nebraska stepped up.”

When asked by The Nonpareil about Iowa’s overwhelmed food banks, Vilsack said that, over the last few years, money from a \$5 million fund has been granted out to food banks nationally through USDA’s Commodity Credit Corporation to help them purchase more food.

Vilsack said something similar could be done to provide assistance.

“It’s obviously up to the community to assist and help with donations,” Vilsack said. “We’re going to take back from this visit a challenge for our team to see whether or not we can use resources that are available to the department as we have in the past.”

Other programs still help

Although there’s no additional SUN Bucks going to low-income Iowa families, the federal food stamp program — officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition



ANDREW SMITH, THE NONPAREIL

Pancake and sausage on a stick, granola, yogurt, green beans, local cherry tomatoes, oranges and milk were on the menu at Longfellow Elementary School during lunch — offered through the Council Bluffs Community School District’s Summer Meals Program — on July 5.

Assistance Program — continues to provide money to feed hungry children and their families.

Without the additional income, though, those dollars have to stretch further, or in some cases it is likely some family members have to skip meals.

In Iowa, guidelines revised in September 2023 say that a family of four needs to make less than \$2,500 of net income a month to qualify for a maximum amount of \$973 of monthly SNAP benefits. For each additional or fewer person, the net monthly limit adjusts \$429 while the maximum monthly benefit amount adjusts \$219.

While Iowa breaks the trinity of the USDA’s Summer Nutrition Programs for Kids by omitting Summer EBT, sponsoring organizations across the state continue to fulfill the other two methods of keeping kids fed with eat-on-site and meals-to-go options.

The Council Bluffs Community School District has been a sponsor of summer meals for decades through the program, which is primarily funded by federal tax dollars.

The district also received a summer expansion grant through the Iowa Department of Education program, allowing for the purchase of more locally produced items during the summer.

“The need doesn’t go away just because it’s summer break and the program exists for that exact reason,” said Lisa Stewart, director of nutrition services at the Council Bluffs Community School District. “People don’t just miraculously not be hungry or have all kinds of money in the summer when their kids aren’t in school. I think the opposite is true.”

The school district runs 12 locations across Council Bluffs and Carter Lake. It also offers a meals-to-go location in Crescent, which distributes seven-day meal packs on Tuesdays.

Another grant from an anonymous donor allows for adults to grab their own plate during breakfast and lunch distributions at the Council Bluffs meal sites. Children also don’t have to attend school in the district in order to partake in a meal.

Most locations serve both lunch and breakfast at varying times for convenience. All meals are free — the same as during the school year, as the Council Bluffs district qualifies under the USDA’s Community Eligibility Provision, eliminating the distinction between full-prize,

reduced-price and free lunch students found at many other schools.

“Right now, we’re seeing about 1,000 kids a day between breakfast and lunch,” Stewart said of the summer meal program. “Not all of our sites offer both. It just kind of depends on what additional programming is taking place at those sites.”

Additional programming is offered at different locations, such as Camp Summer Explore at Longfellow Elementary, where meals are provided every day. Meals are also offered at the Carter Lake Boys and Girls Clubs as well as at the public libraries in Carter Lake and Council Bluffs.

“We have a really long-standing relationship with the library in Council Bluffs,” Stewart said. “They’re there for the same thing, you know? They want to reach kids and provide a service and we want to do that too.”

Summer meals make an impact

Those participating in the summer meal programs offered by the Council Bluffs schools or by other providers — including St. Albert Catholic School this year, thanks to the state’s expansion grant — are making the most of what is provided.

But advocates worry the hunger crisis could be exacerbated if SNAP benefits are cut in the federal farm bill. One version of the bill would cut nearly \$30 billion from SNAP benefits over the next decade, including \$170 million in funding expected to go to Iowans.

They’ve also not given up on pushing for Iowa to embrace Summer EBT in 2025, with the Iowa Hunger Coalition launching a petition Monday calling for the Reynolds administration to change course.

“With household budgets stretched thin, families are facing incredibly difficult decisions to put food on the table this summer,” Sheila Hansen, a coalition board member and senior policy advocate and government relations manager at Common Good Iowa, said in a news release. “Meanwhile, the state of Iowa is sitting on a two-billion dollar surplus. Summer EBT is an incredibly effective use of state funds that would make a profound impact in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of Iowans.”

Monika Carroll, who runs an in-home daycare, appreciates the variety and accessibility of the summer meals available through the Council Bluffs Community School District’s on-site program.

From patrons of the Longfellow cafeteria, pancakes and sausage on a stick works for any meal of the day. Carroll added that the environments at schools and the library are exciting for the children in her daycare, where they sometimes get to see their teachers while enjoying meals as a group.

“I have three different families in my house in the summer, and they don’t all like the same thing. It’s nice to come here,” Carroll said. “Whenever they eat together, they encourage each other to try things.”

Scott Stewart contributed to this report.

Food banks ask Congress to prioritize SNAP aid

TOM BARTON
Lee-Gazette Des Moines Bureau

Over the last three years, the North Liberty Community Pantry has witnessed a 70% increase in the number of families needing assistance putting food on the table.

“And they are visiting more than twice as frequently as they used to,” Executive Director Ryan Bobst said. “This year we will surpass serving 3,000 unique people for the first time in our nearly 40-year history. Each month that goes by, we continue to set new distribution and service records.”

Consistently heightened food insecurity in Iowa has put growing pressure and strain on food banks and pantries across the state. Food banks, food pantries and other anti-hunger organizations continue to witness record-breaking numbers of Iowans seeking assistance, said Luke Elzinga, board chair of the Iowa Hunger Coalition and policy and advocacy manager at the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network.

Faced with rising levels of hunger and food insecurity, a group of 18 Iowa-based advocates have joined a national effort urging Congress to prioritize protecting and strengthening the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, in the upcoming farm bill. The SNAP program provides benefits for low-income households to buy groceries.

The Iowa group joined more than 1,400 food banks, pantries and other anti-hunger groups across the country in a letter urging Congress to protect the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s recent changes to the Thrifty Food Plan to raise SNAP benefits.

About 257,000 Iowans are now enrolled in SNAP, the lowest amount in nearly 16 years.

The TFP determines how SNAP benefits are calculated. The 2021 update to the TFP amounted to a 25% increase in SNAP benefits, the largest expansion in the program’s 45-year history. Republicans have said the update ignored long-standing precedent to be cost-neutral, and was done without the input of Congress.

House Agriculture Committee Chair U.S. Rep. Glenn Thompson, a Republican from Pennsylvania, has

insisted the next farm bill restore precedent by placing guardrails on the way SNAP payments are determined to ensure budget neutrality. Such a proposal would reduce future outlays by \$30 billion over the next decade. Democrats have called it a cut and made clear that any reductions in SNAP spending would cross a red line.

Senate Democrats’ proposed farm bill framework protects SNAP benefit levels and purchasing power through the Thrifty Food Plan by continuing the five-year re-evaluation to the TFP included in the bipartisan 2018 farm bill.

The USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan estimates the cost of a healthy diet at the lowest price point and is used to determine SNAP benefit amounts. The Thrifty Food Plan was modernized in 2021, as directed in the 2018 bill. The average daily SNAP benefit increased from \$4.25 per person to \$5.45 in fiscal 2022.

In Iowa, daily SNAP benefits in fiscal 2023 average less than \$5.58 per person.

Iowa food banks and other anti-hunger groups in the state say a cost-neutral plan would deepen America’s hunger crisis.

“The level of need among Iowans is rising, and current resources are not adequate for families struggling to make ends meet,” said Mandi Remington, director of Corridor Community Action Network.

Food banks and food pantries began experiencing a dramatic increase in demand in April 2022, when temporary pandemic-era changes to benefit amounts ended.

“We have seen an explosion in need from neighbors that were previously surviving,” Bobst said of the North Liberty pantry. “We had one family come in earlier this year to share they used to receive SNAP assistance while both adults were working, then after expanded eligibility expired, they lost all their benefits and came to the pantry for the first time — all while both adults were still working.”

At a time when living expenses are on the rise, the Iowa-based groups say it is imperative that Congress strengthen SNAP, including by increasing benefits, expanding access, permitting the purchase of hot foods and simplifying eligibility requirements.

RAGBRAI

From A1

As far as overnight lodging for the Sunday send-off, Davis said numerous riders plan to stay at the main campground area, while some have opted for charters to complete the tour.

“Many others prefer to camp in residents’ yards or occupy spare bedrooms or floor space in homes, and we’ve received an excellent local response,” Davis said. “We appreciate these residents for exemplifying ‘Iowa Nice’ to our guests.”

The event has brought out many sponsors, she added.

“Our local businesses recognize that hosting RAGBRAI entails

more than just a one-day celebration,” Davis said. “They understand the potential economic benefits for our small businesses, the opportunity to showcase our town nationally to new visitors, and the financial support required by the local organizers. I am incredibly thankful to them for their unwavering commitment to our community.”

As the clock clicks down, Glenwood will be ready to celebrate RAGBRAI with riders as they arrive next weekend. More information, including details for riders, can be found at glenwoodragbrai.com.

“We are as ready as we’ll ever be to accommodate a temporary population four times our usual size for 24 hours,” she said.

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