



SNAP Challenge Highlights Issue of Hunger

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After a long weekend of work and family obligations and a long night of soothing her sick toddler, a welcome part of the Rev. Colleen Preuninger's Monday morning would normally have been a steaming cup of coffee.

Not this past Monday morning.

Preuninger, United Methodist Ecumenical chaplain at Syracuse University, is one of many local faith leaders and community members participating in the CNY SNAP Challenge, Feb. 9-15. The challenge, facilitated by the InterFaith Works of CNY Round Table of Faith Leaders, has encouraged individuals to live this week on a food budget of \$29.40, the amount that individuals receive through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). With limited funds, nonessentials such as coffee were among the first things to go for Preuninger.

SNAP has been a frequent target of deep cuts in state and federal budgets in recent years, despite the fact that the need for the program is supported by sobering statistics. According to Feeding America, more than 47 million low-income Americans participate in SNAP to help purchase food, and 76 percent of SNAP households include a child, elderly person or disabled person.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 56 percent of Onondaga County lives below the poverty level, and 40,745 households in the metropolitan Syracuse area use food stamps.

On Wednesday, halfway through the weeklong SNAP Challenge, participants gathered at Hendricks Chapel to talk about their experiences.

"This is the second year that the IFW of CNY Round Table of Faith Leaders has spearheaded the SNAP Challenge for our community," says the Rev. Tiffany Steinwert, dean of SU's Hendricks Chapel, who is co-chairing this year's challenge with Rabbi Dan Fellman of Temple

Concord, SU's Jewish chaplain. "Today more than ever, families are struggling to put healthy food on the table. Since last year, the SNAP benefit has been slashed by nearly 10 percent while food costs have continued to rise. I was amazed at how much less my SNAP allotment purchased this year as compared to last. This year I had no money for fruit, no money for coffee, no money for milk, no money for even an afternoon snack. The difference from last year to this year is a stark reminder of the plight of hungry families everywhere."

"By participating in this challenge, we stand in solidarity with those across Central New York who rely on SNAP to feed their families. We hope by raising awareness people might lobby their representatives for increases to SNAP benefits, donate funds to relief agencies, or volunteer in their local food pantry. We can solve the problem of hunger in our communities, but we can only do it together," says Steinwert.

Participants are blogging about their experiences. Visit the blog at <http://www.cnysnapchallenge.org> or join the conversation on Twitter at #CNYsnapchallenge. To conclude the week, through its Better Together initiative, Syracuse University and Hendricks Chapel will hold its annual Can It! donation day at the Carrier Dome at the SU men's basketball game on Saturday, Feb. 15, at 3 p.m., collecting nonperishable food items and money for the Food Bank of Central and Northern New York.

Kathleen Stress, executive director of the Food Bank, says the face of hunger has changed in recent years, and now includes more families, seniors and veterans than in the past.

"Hunger affects us all; it is no longer the homeless man holding the sign on the corner that visits a soup kitchen," she says. "These days the face of hunger includes a family where the adults are employed but cannot make ends meet, a child who sits next to your child in school and goes to bed hungry, and an elderly neighbor who skips meals to afford medication. In Central New York, the impact is being felt by many in our local communities."

Preuninger says she easily spends \$20-\$30 per week on coffee, between brewing her own and picking a cup up at the coffee shop. "How many people today in the city of Syracuse alone could have used a cup of coffee this morning that they couldn't afford? How many mothers, like me, after being up all night with their little one could have used a steaming cup of Sumatra to get them through a long day at work? I really could have used that coffee, and I'm sure they could have too. But I couldn't afford it, so I went without."

"Whether it's a morning coffee, a cold Diet Coke with dinner, or a square of chocolate before bed—even the small comforting 'extras' are not possible when you have to stretch \$29.40 to fill the entire week. It's a stark reality when a cup of coffee becomes a luxury," Preuninger blogged.

SNAP Challenge participant Alan Thornton, CEO of the Syracuse Rescue Mission, blogged that his whole family is taking the challenge, and a smaller budget has meant fewer options when planning healthy meals.

“The first thing I realized quickly was we have very little margin to work with. We knew buying a family pack of ground beef would get us through at least two dinner meals but the difference between buying 80/20 for \$13 or 90/10 for \$20 was \$7, or over 10 percent of our budget, so we opted for the least healthy option. When buying a loaf of bread we did the same thing, opting for the larger, plain white loaf for \$1 instead of the much smaller multi-grain for \$2. These two situations are just examples how much more difficult it might be to choose healthier options just because of the cost,” he says.

“I recognize that my participating in the SNAP challenge is a small attempt to understand the harsh reality for many of our neighbors. I am experiencing a sliver of their struggle. The individuals who make it work on \$4.20 of food, every day, are the real story,” says SNAP Challenge participant Mike Melara, executive director of Catholic Charities of Onondaga County.

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