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SNAP freeze set to ripple throughout New Mexico food system

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By Margaret O'Hara mohara@sfnewmexican.com
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A frustrated Alma Vega takes a break while working on inventory Tuesday as The Food Depot stocks up in anticipation of a SNAP benefits freeze Saturday.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

When Vicky Lu, the owner of Yin Yang Chinese Restaurant in Santa Fe, heard about Albuquerque eateries offering free meals to kids if the federal government freezes food aid this week, she decided to follow suit.

Starting Monday, kids can eat free at Yin Yang's lunch buffet, the restaurant announced Tuesday in a Facebook post. Lu said she's trying to figure out a way to extend the benefit to dinner time, too.

"I thought it was a great opportunity to help out the community, for those that are in need," she said.

The federal government has told states that benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — also known as SNAP and formerly called food stamps — will run out at the end of the month if the shutdown persists. More than 450,000 New Mexicans, or more than 1 in 5, rely on the federal food benefits program, including over 170,000 kids and 65,000 seniors.

"Bottom line, the well has run dry. At this time, there will be no benefits issued November 01," states a banner on the website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers SNAP.

New Mexico officials are working on a plan, potentially set for release Wednesday, to help residents in need weather a possible pause in benefits. Local grocery stores and food banks also are bracing for the change as Saturday approaches, while some local restaurants are stepping up to provide free meals to kids.

"We can all choose to do good together," said Jill Dixon, executive director of the Santa Fe-based regional food bank The Food Depot. "We can all choose to make sure our community gets fed."

SNAP — not the charitable food system — is the most effective way to combat hunger in the U.S., Dixon said. For every meal provided by a food bank, SNAP provides nine meals, according to estimates from the nationwide food bank network Feeding America.

"The food stamps program was really designed as the first line of defense against food insecurity and hunger in America," Dixon said. "It is the most effective and efficient way to address that particular issue — by infusing cash into the economy of individual families so that they can become part of an economic driver within their own communities."

Impact on grocers and producers

SNAP dollars translate to big business for grocery stores, food distributors and producers in New Mexico and across the U.S. The state Health Care Authority estimates the program has a total economic impact of \$1.8 billion in the state and has created more than 17,000 jobs. Every \$1 in SNAP benefits can generate up to \$1.80 in economic activity, according to the state agency.

As a result, food sellers all over the U.S. have called on Congress to act to ensure uninterrupted access to SNAP benefits.

"Protecting these programs is an investment in the health, stability, and well-being of Main Street communities across the country," National Grocers Association President and CEO Greg Ferrara said in a statement.

But the cost of halted SNAP benefits will extend to agricultural producers, too, said Manny Encinias, a cattle rancher and executive director of the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute.

The local farmers market participates in the Double Up Food Bucks program, which allows SNAP recipients to double the benefits they can use to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Encinias said SNAP dollars make up about 10% to 15% of farmers' weekly sales at the market, a sizable chunk in an industry with already thinning margins. A freeze on benefits will "ripple" through the food system, he said.

"It's going to affect both ends of the food spectrum: the consumers who need the food for their daily nourishment and the farmers and ranchers who depend on the receipts from those sales to also offset their cost of doing business," Encinias said.

'We're scrappy, we're resourceful'

Without SNAP benefits, Dixon anticipates many New Mexicans will turn to the charitable food system. She expects between 62,000 and 70,000 people across the The Food Depot's nine-county service area to need additional food assistance — possibly for the first time.

The food bank has been stocking up in anticipation of the benefits freeze Saturday, Dixon said. Food Depot staff purchased about \$400,000 in food in recent weeks — a sum that would typically last the food bank three months.



Food Depot driver Andrew Aragon loads a truck bound for food pantries in Española and Dixon on Tuesday. The food bank is stocking up in anticipation of a SNAP benefits freeze Saturday.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

One of the best ways New Mexicans can aid in those efforts is through financial contributions, which allow The Food Depot to purchase food in bulk and get it to Northern New Mexico quickly, Dixon said. The organization is also putting more volunteers to work repackaging foods for distribution.

Should SNAP recipients not receive their November benefits, Dixon said, "Food banks [will] do what they do best. We're scrappy, we're resourceful and we're deeply committed to standing strong for our community."

Restaurant step up with offers

To help ease the pressure on families and food banks, a growing number of New Mexico restaurants have announced plans to provide free meals to children until SNAP benefits are restored.

"We are not taking sides or making this political. We just believe that no child should ever go hungry," restaurant Chicken Salad Chick of Albuquerque posted Monday on Facebook, offering a free kid's meal to any child.

A wave of restaurants followed suit, first in Albuquerque and then in cities throughout the state. Restaurants from Portales to Roswell to Jemez Springs have all pledged free meals for children starting in early November.

In Santa Fe, Café Castro has also announced plans to offer free meals to children.

Route 66 Coffee & Boba in Edgewood took the effort a step further, taking to Facebook to offer a 25% discount on drinks for customers who bring in nonperishable foods — which the coffee shop plans to donate to local food pantries.

It also is offering free a bagel and drink to "any person who is struggling and needs something to eat or breakfast for your child(ren)," according to the social media post.

"We appreciate the support we have always received from this community and if we can give back in any sort of way, we are happy to assist," the post said.

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Where to find a free meal

Meals for seniors: The city of Santa Fe's Senior Services Division serves dine-in lunch from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Seniors 60 and older must register for the program to attend and receive a meal.

Hot meals are served at the Mary Esther Gonzales, Luisa and Pasatiempo senior centers. Transportation to meal sites is also available. For more information, visit santafenm.gov/community-services/division-of-senior-services.

Meals for teens: Meals are provided at the Santa Fe Teen Center, registration for which is free to any youth ages 12 to 18. Meals are served from 3 to 7 p.m. daily, and two meals are available Saturdays between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

To register to become a Teen Center member, visit: santafenm.gov/community-services/recreation/teen-center.

Meals for children: Restaurants throughout New Mexico are offering free meals for children starting in early November.

In Santa Fe:

- Yin Yang Chinese Restaurant: Free lunch buffet meal for children starting Nov. 3.
- Café Castro: Free bean and cheese burrito for children under 12; child must be present.

In Edgewood and Moriarty:

- Route 66 Coffee & Boba: Any person "who is struggling and needs something to eat or breakfast for your child(ren)" can receive a bagel and a drink. Receive a 25% discount on a drink for bringing in nonperishable food.
- ButterCrust Pizza: One small single topping pizza per child; child must be present.

In Rio Rancho:

- The Hopper Pub and Pizzeria: Free small kid's pizza per child; child must be present.
- Delectable Baking Co.: Free sack lunches, snacks and pantry items for children and seniors.

In Albuquerque:

- Burrow Cafe: One free kids' menu item per child; child must be present.
- Chicken Salad Chick: One free kid's meal per child; child must be present.
- Chile Chicken Nashville Hot Chicken: One free kid's meal per child for children 12 and under. Child must be present.
- Meraki Coffee + Market: One free breakfast sandwich per child.
- Mrs. Sprinkles Ice Cream: One free mini scoop (sprinkles included) per child; child must be present.
- Napoli Coffee: One free kid's meal per child; child must be present.
- Richie B's Pizza: One free topping slice of pizza per child 12 or younger; child must be present.
- Rio Grande Social: Free cheese pizza to any school-aged child affected by SNAP changes. Complimentary Social Platter breakfast for disabled veterans and seniors on Saturday and Sunday from 9 to 11:45 a.m. Ask for the "social platter special."
- Tacos Pita: Children and seniors eat free; children and seniors must be present.
- Tasty Pot NM: Free kids meals for affected families. Mention the "tasty kid's special" to staff members.
- The Homestead Cafe: Free meals for children Friday, Saturday and Sunday; children must be present.
- The Le Bakery: Free kid's meal of cheesy bread or egg sandwich.
- The Girls Coffee House: Every child and up to two accompanying adults and "any disabled community member" will receive a free hot dog or peanut butter and jelly sandwich. All recipients must be present.
- The Yeller Sub: Free kids meal per child; children must be present. Mention the "got your back kids special."
- Urban Hotdog Co.: One free classic starter hotdog per child; child must be present. Mention the "UHDC kids special."

Find a food pantry near you at thefooddepot.org/food-assistance.

Takeaways

- The federal government has told states benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP and food stamps, will run out in a few days — the month's end — if the government shutdown persists.
- The pause in benefits will ripple outward to local food banks, farmers, ranchers, and grocers who depend on SNAP spending — which contributes an estimated \$1.8 billion to New Mexico's economy and supports over 17,000 jobs.
- Though federal food benefits may freeze Saturday, restaurants across the state are offering free meals to children to help families facing food insecurity.

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Margaret O'Hara

Reporter