

Finding Dignity in Hard Times:

Normalizing Support and Confronting Food Insecurity in Delaware

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We are living through a critical time in public health history, a time when the livelihoods, and identities of many are threatened while compounding financial constrictions, pressures on the healthcare system, and increasing costs of goods—including food—are threatening public health. When it comes to nutrition, this convergence of rising food costs and unprecedented federal nutrition program cuts, impacted further by government shut downs, makes real the potential for skyrocketing rates of food security for Delawareans.

In our region the cost of poultry, fish meat and eggs has increased by 8.7% in the past year alone. For families in lower income brackets, who often spend 32% of their household budget on food, inflation can become the difference between having enough food for the family or going without. While our state has long maintained a strong emergency food system network, the reality is that food pantries are no substitute for functional government. These infrastructures, too, are dependent on a functioning Emergency Food Assistance Programs run by the USDA, as well as an active supply of day old and donated food from retailers, manufacturers, and distributors. As the economy contracts, these sources also begin to dry up.

Our research on stigma has shown that as challenges manifest, many experience shame, embarrassment, and blame, among other stigmatizing experiences. Parents report devastating self-judgement, feeling like a bad parent for not being able to feed their children, seeing the challenge as a personal (not structural) failure. As neighbors, colleagues, and practitioners we must keep these realities at the forefront of our interactions. No one should experience embarrassment for needing food and we must be mindful of the systems and stereotypes that perpetuate blame.

Here are a few small steps you can take:

- 1) Change your language. Those eligible to receive food at pantries or through a federal program are “participants” not “program users.”
- 2) Many families struggle with the idea that they are taking more than their share – and that there are people who need it more than they do, even if it’s clear they qualify and have need. Be prepared to counter this prevailing thought. When talking about food program participation with someone, clarify that:
 - a. Many families you know participate. If you participated yourself, tell them!
 - b. That they have already paid into these programs through taxes.
 - c. It’s not about needing help forever, rather, it’s help available now when we need it.
 - d. Everyone should take as much of the resource as they need.

Together, by using compassionate language, challenging harmful assumptions, and affirming that access to food is a right (not a privilege), we can help ensure that every Delawarean feels supported, respected, and nourished during these uncertain times.

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