

Clergy, politicians find out how far food stamps go

by [Josef Kuhn](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

Religious leaders and members of Congress were getting a firsthand taste of what it's like to eat on \$4.50 a day as part of the Food Stamp Challenge in Washington. In the challenge, participants try to live for a week on the average amount received by people who use food stamps, known as the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).

"We do need to put ourselves sometimes in other people's shoes so we can really feel what they have to go through every day," said Donna Christensen, a Democrat who represents the U.S. Virgin Islands as a nonvoting delegate. The Food Stamp Challenge is part of Fighting Poverty with Faith, an annual interfaith initiative endorsed by 50 national religious organizations.

This year is a particularly critical one for the cause, faith leaders said, because Congress is considering significant cuts to the more than \$64 billion program.

On October 27, religious and political leaders teamed up with current SNAP recipients to shop at a Safeway grocery store near Capitol Hill.

One of them was Peg Chamberlin, president of the National Council of Churches and a former adviser to the White House's Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Several decades ago, unable to find a job after leaving a seminary program, Chamberlin signed up for food stamps. But she said she had forgotten what it is like to shop on

such a tight budget. "No soda, no magazines, no coffee," said Chamberlin. She tried not to look at the donuts, croissants and Doritos. "Absolutely no specialty items," she said.

Chamberlin shopped with Vernell Livingston, 72, a local resident whose only sources of income are Social Security payments and SNAP.

At one point, Chamberlin suggested some \$6.99 beef patties to Livingston, who shook her head and said, "No, no, no, no." She selected less-expensive ground turkey instead, which she planned to eat with cheese on 99-cent wheat bread for dinner.

At another point, Livingston put a \$1.29 can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup in her cart and then opted for a generic chicken noodle soup for 89 cents.

Livingston's three small bags of groceries totaled \$29.93, just under the average SNAP allotment of \$31.50 per week.

Although SNAP is called a "nutritional assistance" program, good nutrition may be unattainable for many of those receiving benefits.

Chamberlin said she wished Livingston could have bought more fruits and vegetables, "because it's clear she's very oriented toward eating healthily, but we had to choose between fruits and vegetables and protein."

"The health risks are terrible, when you look at sugar, sodium and fats in the foods you must buy on \$4.50 a day," said Rep. Barbara Lee (D., Calif.), who once received food stamps as a single mother.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat nonvoting delegate from Washington, D.C., said one in four families in the nation's capital are on SNAP. Since the beginning of the recession, she noted, the number of

those on SNAP nationally rose from 27 million to 44 million, and nearly half are children.

Eight members of Congress, all Democrats, agreed to take the Food Stamp Challenge. —RNS