

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

**HENDERSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

MEETING DATE: February 20, 2013
SUBJECT: Social Services' Informational Update
PRESENTER: Lee Luebbe, Chair, DSS Board
ATTACHMENTS: Yes

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

The DSS Board is providing monthly three-minute informational updates to the Board of Commissioners regarding various Social Services issues. The February 2013 update, provided by DSS Board Chair Luebbe, pertains to Food Stamps.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

No Board action requested. This item is for information only.

Suggested Motion:

No motion suggested.

In a recent conversation with Chairman Messer, it was brought to my attention that there still seems to be some misunderstandings about the Food Stamp program – now known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). This morning I want to spend our three minutes to attempt to clear the air...maybe not so much for you...but for the general public.

Who is eligible? What items can be purchased with food stamps and what cannot be purchased with food stamps? Just how many dollars do households receive and on what basis? These are three areas still often misunderstood. I am sure you receive some of these misguided comments.

Citizens standing in line at any store that is authorized by the USDA to take food stamps can easily draw the wrong conclusions if they see beer, wine, liquor, tobacco, or any nonfood items such as pet food, soaps, paper products, and household supplies, vitamins and medicines, food that will be eaten in the store and hot food in the checkout order of a citizen using her or his EBT card. NONE of these can be paid for with food stamps. I repeat NONE of these can be purchased with food stamps.

Households can use food stamps to buy food to eat, such as breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish, poultry and dairy products. Seeds and plants which produce food can also be purchased.

The citizen who observes the buyer checking out using an EBT card needs to understand that it is no longer necessary for food purchasers to separate products at checkout. The EBT card (Electronic Transfer Card) that looks like an ATM card will NOT authorize purchases for the products that are not eligible for purchase with the EBT card. The feature allows recipients to purchase all of their products in one transaction, with eligible products paid for by the EBT card and ineligible products paid for as the buyer chooses – cash or perhaps another debit card.

Who is eligible? How much can a household receive?

Anyone who is a U.S. citizen may apply for food assistance. Only qualified immigrants, such as those that have been in the United States legally for five years or more, and are under 18, disabled, or have worked 40 qualifying quarters may apply for food assistance. A household must have a monthly income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level to qualify. For example, John and Jane Doe, a household of two, can earn up to \$19,128 a year to receive Food Stamps. The maximum monthly Food Stamp benefit John and Jane can receive is \$367 or approximately \$13.00 per day. Only John and Jane can use their card because they have a specific pin number. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for food stamps – regardless of how long they have been in this country.

Henderson County Dept. of Social Services (DSS) provides a preliminary electronic screening tool to increase service delivery and access. Available on the DSS website (www.hendersoncountync.org/dss/food_assistance.html), this tool does not guarantee actual eligibility for assistance. To apply for benefits and receive final determination, you must complete an application and be interviewed by a Food Assistance caseworker at DSS, including providing all required information.

Once the caseworker has determined that a household is eligible, shelter and utility expenses, and possibly other deductions from household income, will be considered. All applicants are screened for emergency benefits during the interview process.

What is the Food Stamp Caseload in Henderson County and what is the composition of our caseload?

The peak of the caseload during the wake of the Great Recession was 6,460 households in June 2012. As the county's jobless rate has dropped, so has the Food Stamp caseload. In December 2012, there were 6,319 households, which included 13,861 individuals, or an average of 2.2 persons per household. The median value of the benefit per household was \$200.

Looking at the Food Stamp caseload, 13% are county residents with the fixed incomes of the elderly (Social Security) or the disabled (SSI). About 38% of households have monthly employment earnings, which average \$1,182 (or \$14,184 annually). Only 1% of Food Stamp recipients also receive benefits from the Work First (welfare reform) program. Approximately two-thirds of county residents benefiting from Food Stamps are age 65 or older, age 17 or younger, or disabled.

Finally, let me share a piece of information that relates to the overall total value of benefits issued each month in Henderson County -- \$1.6 million each month (or about \$19 million a year). Economists calculate that every Food Stamp dollar generates \$1.79 in real gross domestic product increase. Consumer spending is the largest part of the economy. When county residents spend Food Stamps at a local grocery store, the money gets turned over several times generating economic activity, or "trickling up" by paying store employees, food delivery truck drivers, and the farmers who grow the food. The federal government pays 96% and Henderson County pays 4% of the total program cost.

For citizens who do not qualify for Food Stamps, the County has other sources of food to assist these families and individuals. The food pantries, Interfaith Ministry, "feed the kids" programs provided by various churches and served at the Boys and Girls Club -- all assist to supplement and meet the nutritional needs of the our families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet. Henderson County is indeed fortunate to have many groups to support the needy of this county and who work collaboratively with Social Services to do so.

Thank you.