

Take the food stamp challenge

**By Lou Baldwin
Special to the CS&T**

Erinn Hill and her husband, Ben Weaver, aren't hanging out at Starbucks this week, and neither is their daughter, Lucinda. Instead, they are participating in a week-long hunger awareness program, "The Food Stamp Challenge."

Lucinda didn't get a vote but at 18 months she's really much too young for expensive lattes anyway.

Under the terms of the challenge, Hill and Weaver have decided to limit their total food intake to purchases for the week equaling the maximum weekly food stamp allotment for a family of three – \$93.10.

Because part of the challenge is to determine whether one can really use food stamps for a complete food budget, as the federal government contends, fudging is discouraged.

Hill and Weaver won't be using previous purchases in the cupboard, or leftovers in the fridge, nor will they visit friends or family to score a free meal. The only concession the kindly organizers allow is condiments – it's okay to use the salt and mustard they already have.

Think about it. Could you get by spending just \$35.47 a week (\$152 a month) for all of your food? That's the maximum allowed for an individual under the federally-funded food stamp program. For a family of two, the allowance is \$64.87.

About three dozen people in the in the Philadelphia area intend to do that as part of the Hunger Awareness Program, which is sponsored by the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger.

The challenge began July 17 and is supposed to run until July 23, but some of the volunteers with scheduling conflicts are opting to do it at other times. They will all get together August 17 to share their experiences.

How does it work? The volunteers aren't receiving foods stamps – they are following a food stamp budget using their own funds.

Just as food stamps may not be used for non-food items such as soaps, paper goods, alcohol, and tobacco, they have agreed to try to spend their allotted amount strictly on food. If they choose to eat out or order in, it comes out of their "food stamp" money – which means that's not likely to happen.

Hill and Weaver will be able to spend \$93.10 this week, in imitation of a family that is entirely dependent on public funding for its income.

Most families that receive food stamps are really the working poor – people who have some funds – and for them, the food stamps are meant to supplement, rather than cover their entire food budget. Food stamps are based on family size, income and other factors. Single person benefits can range from \$10 a month to \$152 a month, with the average about \$97 a month, according to Julie Zaebst, the advocacy coordinator for the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger and organizer of the challenge.

"The purpose of the Food Stamp Challenge is to raise awareness of hunger and what the food stamp program can and can't do," Zaebst said.

Although many people thinks of foods stamps as pieces of paper, the program now uses more efficient Access Cards — plastic debit cards issued to the recipients, which are electronically replenished monthly with the allotted benefits for an individual or family.

Nationally, the federal government disburses about \$31 billion for food stamps annually, and because allotments increase automatically with the cost of living, the sum grows every year. This year's increase was 3 percent, according to Zaebst, who estimates there are 380,000 people receiving food stamps in the five-county area, with 280,000 in Philadelphia alone. The automatic increases may not be keeping pace with the true rise in food costs, because some beneficiaries are reportedly running out of funds in the second or third week of the month, and have to rely on emergency allotments, food banks and soup kitchens.

While food stamps are the major government food assistance program, there are others as well.

In fact, although Hill and Weaver are limiting their food purchases during the challenge to the maximum food stamp allowance for a three person family, technically, she could claim more.

Another food program available to families with modest incomes is the Woman-Infants and Children program (WIC). Those funds go to families for infants, small children, pre-partum and post-partum women, and nursing mothers.

More generous eligibility requirements extend the WIC safety net to families well above the poverty level, and do not negatively impact any other food stamp allowance. WIC could add between \$37 and \$91 to a family food budget each month for specific food such as milk, infant formula and cereal, depending on the age of the child and condition of the mother.

Also, if the family had an older child, he or she would be eligible for federally-funded school lunch programs and summer feeding programs, which through breakfast, lunch and a snack provide approximately four-dollars worth of food to hungry children every day. While that is not money paid directly to a family, it does relieve the strain on the food budget.

Hill is aware of the school lunch and summer feeding programs, because they are locally administered by the archdiocesan Nutritional Development Services (NDS) where she works as an outreach manager. This year, NDS is providing 24,000 children's meals daily at 550 locations during the summer months.

Like Zaebst and Hill, a number of the volunteer participants in the food stamp project are already aware of the challenge presented by human hunger, both locally and globally.

One participant, Anne Ayella, who is the assistant director of NDS, has spent a career feeding the hungry.

"I want to put myself in the shoes of the people we serve — get a sense of some of the tough decisions they must make," Ayella said. "I want to be in solidarity with them. Certainly, the challenge will be difficult, but you can do anything for a week."

Maureen McCullough normally deals with advocacy for the needy on a wider stage, and in areas where hunger is a far greater problem than here in Philadelphia. She is regional director for Catholic Relief Services for the nine states and 32 dioceses of the Northeastern United States. Her work with the Bishops' agency,

which combats global poverty, has made her an eyewitness to extreme hunger in the poorest nations of the world.

"CRS works with feeding families around the world, and we are all brothers and sisters. People in places such as Kenya and Nigeria have far less than we have," she said. This (food stamp challenge) is the whole principle of solidarity. It is an opportunity to, at least, begin to understand and identify with people who are hungry."

Mercy Sister Mary Scullion, the executive director of Project Home and Philadelphia's best known champion for the poor, jumped the gun a bit is also participating in the challenge, but because of a scheduling conflict, she took her week on food stamp rations a week early.

"It's important for me to know how people live — to under what food stamps translate into," she said. "It's an education."

Sister Mary's diet for the week emphasized nutrition, not fine cuisine. It was heavy on beans, lentils, tuna fish, peanut butter, and cheese, especially cottage cheese. "I'm lucky I love beans," she said.

She is a person with a very busy schedule, who is, perhaps, used to buying a bagel and coffee in the morning, and who often dines with people who assist in her ministry. But her \$35.47 weekly food budget meant that she had to take time out to prepare food.

"I have to make my own lunch, I can't just buy it," she said. "It requires time and planning, and it definitely limits what else I'm able to do. It really makes you wonder how people can do this all the time."

Reporter Lou Baldwin and his wife, Rita, are participating in the food stamp challenge. Look for his report next month, after the challenge is completed, and participants have gathered at NDS to trade experiences.

Food Stamps: Food for discussion

**By Lou Baldwin
Special to the CS&T**

Pasta, peanut butter and price awareness were the order of the week.

Thirty-one people, as individuals or members of family groups, vowed to try to live within a federal food stamp budget for just one week in late July. How did they do? On average they lasted six days before running out of money – often with minor (or major) cheating. It wasn't easy.

They were all volunteer participants in the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger's Food Stamp Challenge. Most were people whose profession is in the field of social service and food programs for people with low incomes. They participated in order to gain better insight into the lives of their clients, and out of a sense of solidarity with those who are less fortunate.

"I do this day-in and day-out, and you think you have a lot of detailed information and a good sense of what life is like for people on food stamps," said Julie Zaebst, the advocacy coordinator for the Coalition Against Hunger.

Zaebst's assigned budget was \$35.47 – the maximum allowance for an individual. Her food for the week was heavy on cold cereals, pasta and turkey sandwiches. A \$3 Chinese veggie dinner special was split into two dinners. Fresh produce was not in her diet. Julie lasted five days.

"I went out for dinner two nights," she admitted ruefully. "As much as I thought I knew what a food stamp budget was like, this was a reality check."

Because Anne Ayella participated with her husband, Fred, the couple's allotted budget was \$64.87.

Ayella is assistant director of community relations for Nutritional Development Services, the archdiocesan agency that runs government-funded school feeding programs and summer feeding programs, and supplies food to parish and community food cupboards – where food stamp users often go when their allotment runs out. She and members of her agency are well aware of the nutritional needs of the disadvantaged.

As with most participants in the challenge, Ayella did most of her shopping in advance, and planned meals ahead.

Her food for the week included three boxes of Grape Nuts cereal, a gallon of milk, two bottles of seltzer, five cans of tuna, macaroni-and-cheese, frozen vegetables, Italian bread, eggs, string beans, orange juice, bananas, peanut butter, pork roast, tomatoes – and a one-night splurge on Chinese takeout.

The Ayellas made it though the week – they found it doable, but monotonous. They weren't starving, but they found it was impossible, on that budget, to do even little things such as going for ice cream, or having a social dinner with friends. And there was no snacking between meals.

Ayella also felt she spent too much of her budget on non-perishables – since most nutritionists advise eating fresh fruit and vegetables.

"Many neighborhoods do not have a good produce store," Avella said. "It's more difficult if there isn't one — I shopped three different stores, by driving around. Some people can't do that."

Participants in the challenge did not use real food stamps — just their equivalent in money.

Actually food stamps have been replaced by nontransferable Access cards, which are debit cards good for food purchases only, and which are replenished with allotted funds monthly by the state. Access card sums vary according to a family's income, and are usually under the maximum allowed to totally destitute individuals or families.

Challenge volunteers Amy Stoner and Renee Hudson borrowed Access cards from acquaintances for their shopping, and reimbursed the holders for their purchases. That is illegal of course — Access cards may be used only by the person to whom they are issued.

The two women decided to borrow and use the government food debit card out of solidarity with the poor, because food-stamp usage is often accompanied by a sense of humiliation: The fruits of public charity can be bitter, if those near you in the checkout line are looking in your shopping cart to see whether you are spending taxpayers' money wisely.

Stoner is administrator of several archdiocesan Family Service Centers, including the Northeast Philadelphia Family Service Center, and Hudson is an assistant administrator of the Northeast Center.

Both participated in the challenge along with their husbands, and one child. Their allotment for food was \$93.10.

Hudson, shopping for herself, her husband, Emanuel and daughter Deja, 5, was not used to entering the supermarket with a set budget, or actually having to plan meals a week at a time. As part of her challenge, she didn't use some of the more expensive markets that she and her husband prefer — and of course, she did not splurge.

Her basket included pork chops, chicken — lots of chicken — frozen vegetables on sale, milk, bread, cheese, mayonnaise, lunch meats on sale, peanut butter, jelly, apple juice on sale. and Fruit Loop and Shredded Wheat breakfast cereal.

Hudson successfully completed the Challenge, although she found it uncomfortable to use an Access card. "I guess the government should be more realistic about the amount of money, food is expensive," she said.

Stoner participated with her husband Steve and son, Rob, 16. Her allotted budget of \$93.10 was exactly the same as Hudson's — but any parent will tell you it is at least twice as expensive to feed an active teenager as it is to feed a pre-schooler, which is something government guidelines don't take into account.

Stoner tried to cut down on the amount of food purchased, rather than alter the types of food her family usually eats .

When she set out for the supermarket, she said, Rob told her: "'I'm not going with you.'"

She made her rounds of the market believing she was shopping judiciously, then went to the self-checkout where the Access Card might be less conspicuous, she said.

She had half the food still in her cart when she reached her limit, and had the humiliation of having to put the rest back, in sight of the waiting line. Eliminated were the usual snack foods, sodas and convenience foods.

In the end, Stoner brought home T-bone steaks, shish-kabobs, ground meat, asparagus, eggplant, spinach, romaine lettuce, eggs, bagels, coffee, creamer, iced tea, and a case of bottled water.

In theory, leftovers from dinner would serve as lunch the next day.

The Stoners' dinners were great, but some nights, there were no leftovers.

"I didn't eat lunch at all, Stoner said. "My husband had meatballs for breakfast. I had to water-down the iced tea, and it still didn't last. My son's friends are used to snacks at our house — they stopped coming around. My husband and son were hungry."

Stoner's family couldn't quite make it through. But she learned some valuable lessons: Food shopping on a very limited budget is a skill that must be taught. One must pick and choose markets. [For example, she discovered the chain where she normally shops — and whose gift cards her agency often gives to people in need — is really one of the more expensive stores.] And, yes, using an Access card is stigmatizing.

As a family, the Stoners discussed the choices people have to make. "I learned how people run out of food," she said.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge was that which faced Lanny Villalobos, a summer volunteer at the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger.

A Texan who worships at St. Agatha-St. James when she's in Philadelphia, Villalobos is a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania.

Penn, where tuition, fees, room and board add up to \$44,000 a year, is the last place one might think of for food stamps, unless they come up in Sociology 101.

Villalobos, with her \$35.47 food stamp equivalent, experienced the lifestyle of the very poorest of the poor —eating as might an individual living a meager existence in a rented room. She has neither refrigerator nor stove, and so she could buy only nonperishables or convenience foods.

Some days she skipped breakfast and just ate lunch, she said. That was usually a sandwich and chips; fruit was too expensive. For dinner she might have one taco, for \$1.07. "It was difficult to eat healthy. Junk food is cheaper and more filling," she said.

Villalobos made it through, in spite of everything.

She probably spoke for all 31 participants when she said: "It was a difficult challenge. I was hungry, and more tired — and there is an emotional aspect to it. The goal should be to make healthy food more accessible to the poor."

FOOD: FROM THE MARKET

Down to the Last Dollar

Taking the Food Stamp Challenge.

by [Mara Zepeda](#)

Last week at a Trader Joe's checkout register a young woman arranged stacks of change and a pile of wrinkled bills. They wouldn't cover the total. Flustered, she procured and swiped a debit card. It failed. The process repeated itself. "Okay," she said to the patient cashier, "if the next one doesn't work I won't get the salmon." Waiting customers awkwardly stared at the floor as the drama unfolded.

And then the punky girl in sunglasses behind the woman in distress stepped forward and handed her a \$5 bill. "Here," she said. The young woman effused, the donor demurred, the line of customers heaved a collective sigh of relief and silently cheered the kindness of strangers, and the cashier diffused the tension: "We've all been there."

He's probably right: There are lean weeks and fat weeks for most of us. But for the 297,000 Philadelphia residents who rely on food stamps, grocery shopping has become an obstacle course as they strive to craft nutritious meals on pocket change.

A quick primer: Taking into consideration one's income and expenses, food stamp benefits are calculated using the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which is based on a "market basket" of the cheapest foods one could eat to achieve an adequately nutritious diet.

This imagined shopping list is wildly off the mark when squared with the USDA's revised nutrition guidelines. They're preaching whole grains but covering the cost of Wonderbread. Not astonishingly, only 12 percent of low-income households on the TFP get their recommended dietary allowance.

The maximum benefit for a household of one is \$35.47 a week. I've spent the same on imported cheese, an hors d'oeuvres plate or a gallon of olive oil.

So what else can \$35 buy these days? The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger is encouraging you to find out by participating in the Food Stamp Challenge the week of July 17. Eating out, dining in, cocktails after work: All is permissible so long as you figure you've got about \$1.68 per meal.

Sister Mary Scullion, executive director of Project H.O.M.E.—a local organization working to end homelessness—decides to take the challenge early. We meet at the Acme on City Avenue. With a calculator in hand, she makes a beeline for the dry goods. Lentils, pasta, Triscuits, mayonnaise, coffee and raisin bran (generic) sack a third of her budget. She optimistically heads over to the gourmet cheese section and discovers the light Jarlsberg she usually buys is \$9.99 a pound. Aghast, she scurries to fetch a block of cheddar and picks up some cottage cheese that she'll use in her cereal. She augments the protein category with peanut butter, trail mix and cans of tuna. Produce selections amount to a couple of potatoes, yams and apples. Her indulgences are few: one liter of Diet Pepsi and two packages of Peanut Butter Kandy Kakes.

Checking out is tense. The total rings in at \$36.11. We groan. And then she remembers her Acme card, which saves her a whopping \$5.24.

Sister Mary sees firsthand how Project H.O.M.E. residents face food insecurity as they struggle at the end of the month; benefits usually run out after two and a half or three weeks. Without the generosity of friends and strangers, or the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes, the simple task of feeding oneself becomes monumental. "I don't know how people could honestly live on this amount of money," she says.

We'll catch up with Sister Mary in two weeks and spend that remaining \$4.60.

FOOD: SUPPER CLUB

Running on Low

A food-stamp budget is a social and nutritional obstacle course.

by [Mara Zepeda](#)

Sister Mary Scullion sat outside the Acme surrounded by \$30.87 worth of groceries to live on for a week. Looking down at the remaining \$4.60, she confided that her biggest anxiety when embarking on the Food Stamp Challenge was how it would affect her socially.

"Food is a big social thing," she said. "Poverty isolates, and that can be disruptive in many ways. My choices will be limited, and this affects what I'd like to eat and whom I'd like to eat with."

She could already predict how her daily routine would be restricted: innocuous swipes from candy jars, lunch at Project H.O.M.E.'s Back Home Café, grabbing a bite to eat on the go.

And then there were all the impromptu outings with friends and colleagues. Human beings, as social animals, are habituated to meet up over a plate of nachos or a frosty drink. Scullion thought this through. "What—am I just going to run home and grab my can of tuna fish?"

We reunite a week later at Coffee Room Café across from the Art Museum, where for the past five years Scullion has had a regular breakfast date with her running group at the end of their loop around Fairmount Park. She's short of breath and damp and ready to spend her \$4.60 all at once.

"I have it pretty well figured out," she explains to her companions Cindy Ferguson and Norm Jones. "I have enough for a Diet Snapple, a bagel with strawberry jam and a tip." This modest breakfast is a far cry from replenishing the 529 calories she just burned on her 6-mile run. The waitress arrives and Scullion learns that peach and raspberry Snapple are 86¢. She quickly recalculates and settles on a \$1.25 Diet 7-Up.

She describes the week of limited resources as moderately challenging (no hamburgers, which she loves) and, even for someone who has simple tastes, a bit monotonous. "If this is something I'd have to do for a year or six months, it'd get boring," she says.

And then she sheepishly divulges that she's "cheated" three times during the week. She enumerates her transgressions: a dinner that followed a long meeting, lunch at the Back Home Café with colleagues, taking a friend out to pizza on her birthday.

These are all forgivable moments of spontaneously indulging in the natural desire to break bread with other people, an indulgence that involves a choice that can be made only with a certain amount of financial stability.

"It takes time and planning to be poor," says Scullion.

As a counselor at St. Mary Medical Center in Langhorne, Norm Jones sees firsthand just how draining this struggle for daily necessities can be. Alongside the discussions of free range and farm raised, 20 percent of Philadelphians are having a different conversation: dinner tonight or utilities tomorrow. "More and more people are worried about satisfying basic needs," says Jones. "If you're so caught up in meeting them, it's very hard to get beyond thinking about survival and focus on other things."

Such "other things" might include personal growth, professional development and the simple luxury of taking your family out for pizza when it's too hot to cook.