

SNAP Challenge Day #5: “It’s About Life”

September 17, 2013



On Monday afternoon, at just about the mid-point of a five-hour meeting, we took a ten minute break. I left briefly to get some water and, when I returned, a vibrant discussion was underway about the SNAP Challenge. Besides me, there were four or five other people in the meeting participating in the challenge. They were sharing their shopping experiences, cooking strategies and discussing various obstacles, including cancelled dinner plans and uncooperative spouses. Those in the room not taking part in the challenge were highly engaged as the discussion drifted from personal anecdotes to empathy for those who have to fight every day to put food on the table.

I have found many of you to be engaged in the discussion as well. I read the comments that follow these nightly posts and I read the emails you send me. While I welcome the votes of confidence and well wishes, I also understand the position of those who express more cynical views.

In these posts, I've tried to stress that my participation in the SNAP Challenge was not meant to trivialize anyone else's experience or claim that this week of temperance depicts an authentic representation of food insecurity. I would like to reiterate that again because I think it is a critical point. Rather, my intent with this challenge is to learn and, more importantly, to use my position to build awareness about the realities of food insecurity in America. In keeping with that goal, I'd like to share with you – the thousands of people who have been reading this blog – some of the real human stories that I have heard this week:

I received an email yesterday in which I was asked to abandon the challenge. The author of the email outlined several points of contention and, perhaps most poignantly, noted that pulling off a seven-day SNAP “experiment” would not impress those who depend on government assistance for food every day. And he is right. Those who are food insecure have worries and concerns that go well beyond mere hunger. In an earlier post, I discussed the difficulty of prioritizing items at the supermarket. I recognize, however, that I drafted and edited my grocery list in a vacuum that considered no costs beyond food. Most people who are in position to receive SNAP benefits have other worries that are no less significant – the cost or constraints of childcare; an excessive medical bill; a blown transmission that the person can neither afford to fix nor afford not to. The pressure of just keeping the electricity turned on or finding money for rent can overshadow hunger on any given day. As the author of the email so succinctly objected, “It’s not just about food to fill a belly, it’s about life.”

This has been a recurring theme in much of the correspondence, actually. One woman who emailed me earlier today described that in a family of five with three children, when you are food insecure, “you, as a parent, go hungry so your children can eat.” Another woman, who doesn’t qualify for SNAP or any other assistance, in an email described that with six mouths to feed on one salary, two or three days may pass in which her family simply doesn’t eat. And it’s not just food. When she can’t afford gas, she walks to work and her children walk to school. It’s not until her paycheck clears that they can restock their shelves, but the cycle just repeats itself every two weeks.

While my SNAP Challenge has provided a vehicle through which I can learn a little bit more about the day-to-day issues that come with food insecurity, I also want to build awareness – people sharing their real-life experiences. In fact, the conversation that I walked in on during our break yesterday – an organic, uninitiated discussion in which people strove to view hunger in a different light – was exactly what motivated me in the first place. And the comments that follow these posts and the emails that people have sent to me directly, individually and collectively, should give legs to a story that is too often discounted or overlooked altogether. As I said at the start, my goal in participating in the challenge and chronicling my experience is to build awareness. From there, long after this week, my hope is that the conversation evolves and that we can work toward new solutions for a problem that, left ignored, will only to continue to grow in scale and consequence.

So thank you all for the feedback. Let’s keep the conversation going...