

# **Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger Issue Paper Single-Day Issuance of Food Stamps in Idaho—Unnecessary Strain on Food Stamp Participants, Idahoans, and Grocers**

## **THE ISSUE AND CONTEXT**

Since the 1960s, the Food Stamp Program has become the largest nutrition and food assistance program, serving over 218,000 Idahoans in January of 2014. Through partnerships between the USDA, state agencies, and local grocers, the Food Stamp Program is a positive example of a public-private partnership that works and that adds efficiency for all stakeholders in the program—delivering safe, healthy, and affordable foods to those in need of assistance.

The number of people in need of food assistance is higher than it has ever been. The extreme concentration of benefit issuance on the first of the month presents a number of issues. For anti-hunger advocates, there are four major concerns: **1) long lines create food access barriers for all Idahoans when products sell out and those most vulnerable cannot remain in line—especially for Idaho seniors, those with disabilities, and for those with small children; 2) the increasingly negative community perception of ‘those people at those stores on the first of the month;’ 3) avoid unrelated and harmful legislation that could be added to a bill on staggered issuance if left for the legislative session and 4) poor stewardship exists over perishable products when carts are left unattended. The long lines cause foods from the unattended carts to be discarded while Idaho families are in need. And, small grocers who lack refrigeration capacity can’t store enough meat to meet the needs for all customers on the first of the month.**

The USDA strongly supports the staggered issuance of food stamp benefits and in February of 2012 sent a letter to all states clarifying their position. In this letter, the USDA asserts its stance: *“ we are concerned when the effectiveness of the EBT distribution system is adversely impacted by factors that we have the combined ability to influence. Specifically, issuing SNAP benefits on a single day or over a limited number of days, instead of staggered issuance over the month, puts an unnecessary strain on SNAP clients and participating retailers by causing surges in customer traffic at SNAP authorized stores.”* The USDA further instructs states that *in the best interest of serving SNAP clients, we ask states to evaluate their issuance cycles and consider the steps, costs and timetable that might be involved if the conversion of issuance dates to a staggered schedule or a further extension of current schedule could improve services to SNAP clients and their access to healthy and nutritious food choices. States have the authority to stagger SNAP benefit issuance over the entire month as long as no participant goes longer than 40 days between benefit issuance days.*

Three significant retailer problems include: 1) managing inventory for widely purchased perishable products; 2) labor issues like being able to hire full-time employees rather than part-

time; 3) enabling a more positive customer experience by not having massive crowds and congestion on the single day of benefit distribution.

In November of 2011, Brian Williams and the NBC Rock Center Program traveled to Idaho to cover the explosion of food stamp participation and the long lines at grocery stores. Idaho families recruited for this segment shared personal stories of hardship and of food access issues related to congestion at stores even in the ‘wee hours’ on the first of the month. In July 2012, education and petition efforts at five Albertsons stores in Coeur d’Alene, Nampa, Caldwell and Boise collected 400 individual requests for staggered issuance from Idahoans in just under 3 hours. Again, food access stories were shared from those participating in the food stamp program and those not participating but who need to purchase food on the first.

The Idaho Food Stamp Program is an extremely well-run program and will receive federal bonuses again in 2012 for their payment accuracy and timeliness in issuing benefits. Challenges encountered by Idahoans at grocery stores on the first of the month or by retailers in managing staff and inventory do not diminish this excellent record. However, until mid-2009 Idaho did stagger benefit issuance—the change to a one-day issuance schedule was a business decision that has had unintended consequences for all. Idaho is one of only 9 states remaining with a 1-day issuance.

The issue is clear—single day issuance of food stamp benefits in Idaho is causing unnecessary stress on food stamp participants, Idaho customers and retailers. The solution is clear—return to staggered issuance of benefits through existing state authority and partnership with Idaho grocers and advocates.

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