



# STICKER

In 2007, Oregon governor Ted Kulongoski and several members of Congress took the "food stamp challenge": shopping and eating on a \$21 per week budget that represented the average American's food-stamp allotment. Kulongoski and his fellow politicians met with limited success; some managed the challenge, while others ended up cheating by week's end.

After the experiment, Nancy S. Tivol of Sunnyvale Community Services, a California nonprofit emergency assistance agency, wrote in the *San Jose Mercury-News*: "Feeling full on \$3 a day is one challenge; eating nutritionally is virtually impossible. Illinois Democratic Rep. Jan Schakowsky's week's worth of fruits and vegetables consisted of one tomato, one potato, a head of lettuce, and five bananas."

Hungry bellies aside, the food-stamp challenge illuminated a more subtle aspect of poverty: the lack of quality food available to the poor. For some, the opportunity to buy fruits, vegetables, and meats without antibiotics, pesticides or growth hormones is nonexistent, even if they're on the corner market's shelves. Something as basic as organic kale or a pound of natural ground beef might as well be lobster or caviar.

As Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Ca.) reported in a public diary during her week on the food-stamp challenge: "This is such an unhealthy diet. I am trying to eat the most healthy food I can afford, but I have no problem imagining how someone eating like this could quickly develop diabetes or high cholesterol. And with all these carbs, I can see how easy it would be to gain a fair amount of weight."

# SHOCK

ORGANICS AND HEALTHIER FOODS ARE MORE AVAILABLE, BUT NOT EVERYONE CAN AFFORD THEM. SOME OREGONIANS ARE LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS. BY KEVIN ALLMAN

## THE PROBLEM

In Portland and across the nation, organic and locally grown foods are more available than ever before, from upscale specialty stores to supermarkets and even retailers such as Wal-Mart. But with social services agencies reporting record demand for their help, the gap between affordability and availability is wider today than it's ever been. And the products made available by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's commodities program aren't always the most healthful.

"It's just as convenient to use food-stamp cards at the farmers' market as it is at the supermarket. The number of people doing so at the Portland Farmers Market has grown 40% in the last year."

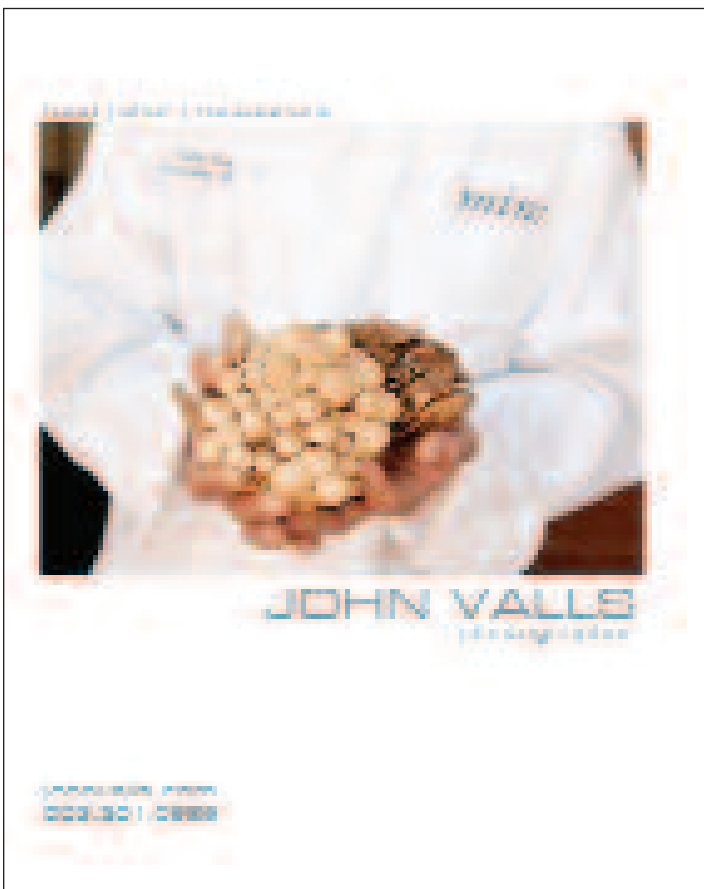
Jessica Chanay knows that struggle firsthand. In the early 1990s, she was a young mother with two children, and her family was on public assistance. Today, she's a program coordinator for the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, a group that's "attempting to address the economic disparity in the availability of healthy foods," according to Chanay.

The task force was created in 1989 by the state legislature to work with state agencies, nonprofit groups, public policy organizations, and federal nutrition programs. One of Chanay's goals is providing an alternative to what she calls "filler food"—high-calorie meals and snacks that may be cheap but provide little nutritional benefit, such as the "dollar menu" items at fast-food restaurants. Chanay says she understands why overworked people who might be dependent on public transportation may find it easier to buy a 99-cent fast-food burrito or cheeseburger after a long day.

"As a society, we don't cook as much as we used to, and that particularly impacts people with lower incomes and higher stress," she says. "But the cost of food is rising rapidly at this point, and the purchasing power of those food dollars has been eroding. We've been working hard on the federal Farm Bill, and the food stamp program, that's really benefited a lot of people. We're trying to help people with limited resources get access to healthy foods, with programs like farmers' market vouchers."

## FARMERS' MARKETS

In 2004, after 12 years of operation, the Portland Farmers Market began accepting Oregon Trail debit cards (electronic food stamps) at its Thursday eastside market at Hinson Church. The program was a success, according to market manager Jaret Foster. "It's now at all four of the Portland Farmers Markets, along with several other farmers' markets in the area," he says.



# ADDING IT ALL UP

Organics and local foods are often pricier than their non-pedigreed equivalents, and for families on public assistance or tight food budgets, the premium for healthier foods can be an unaffordable luxury. But the extent of those price differences can sometimes be shocking, as I found in October when I visited a Portland supermarket (not an upscale health food store).

There were a few surprises. Only pennies separated the price of conventional canned beans from their organic equivalents, and the produce manager said that he'd stopped stocking non-organic beets because the price differential was negligible. But for most staple items, the cost of organics was not only higher, but substantially so. These six items tell the story: The organic alternatives exceed the average recipient's weekly allotment of food stamps\*, but the non-organic varieties consume only 54%.

\*The average food stamp recipient in America receives \$21/week for groceries.

Conventional		Organic	
1 lb. box rotini pasta	.99	1 lb. box rotini pasta	1.49
1 lb. Washington apples	.88	1 lb. Washington apples	1.79
12 oz. peanut butter	1.25	12 oz. peanut butter	3.99
1 lb. ground beef	2.79	1 lb. ground beef	5.99
1 lb. chicken breasts	3.49	1 lb. chicken breasts	7.99
1 doz. brown eggs	1.99	1 doz. brown eggs	3.69
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11.39</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.94</b>



The program is simple, using the same wireless terminal that the market uses to process credit cards. Oregon Trail recipients use their cards to buy wooden \$1 tokens that can be used at the booths just like cash. The tokens are sold in groups of five. Leftover tokens don't expire and can be used at any market, or they can be returned to the terminal booth and the card can be refunded. The tokens work just like food stamps; no change can be given, and they're not good for hot or ready-to-eat foods, though recipients can use the tokens for nearly any other edible market purchase, including seeds and plants used to grow food.

Foster says the number of people using the Oregon Trail debit cards to purchase tokens has grown 40% in the last year. In 2007, the markets took in \$1,300 per month from the food-stamp program. He hopes next year will be even more popular as word spreads that it's just as convenient to use food-stamp cards at the farmers' market as it is at the supermarket. "At this point, it's just a matter of getting the word out," he says. "But it's a super-great program."

Helping to increase access to local farmers' markets, Village Gardens, a project of Janus Youth Programs, runs the Market Shuttle. This service provides free monthly transportation to farmers' markets for Oregon Trail recipients living in North Portland.

## "FOOD INSECURITY"

At the Oregon Food Bank, there's more organic and sustainable food on the shelves than ever, according to food resource manager Mike Moran. But it's not because

of "intentional sourcing," he says. Rather, it's a reflection of the increased amount of healthier foods in the commercial food chain.

"When there's a greater supply of organics in the marketplace, we're going to see that reflected back in donations," Moran says. "Pacific Natural Foods is a good friend of the food bank, and they're our #1 donor so their stuff shows up on our shelves."

Ann Forsthoefel, who works directly with clients as the food bank's director of agency relations, sees the community needs as more basic. "What we see in our clients is the choice between buying food and paying the electric bill this week: the problem of food insecurity. The biggest thing they want is a shelf-stable product, because many of them don't have a stove or a refrigerator-freezer. Many of them are living in vehicles or tents, going from campsite to campsite."

Forsthoefel says that the food bank does focus on education. "Our mission statement includes [addressing] the root causes of hunger, and we do concentrate on providing people with tools to move from a food box to a food-secure home again," she says. "Much of this poverty is generational."

Moran says that the Oregon Food Bank doesn't have the luxury of picking and choosing all that it offers its clients, though it discourages donations of things like soda pop sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup. "We get [organics] whenever we can," he says, "through the businesses we cultivate as partners, such as Amy's Kitchen [an exclusively organic company], which opened a plant in Medford a few years ago."

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The Oregon Food Bank's nutrition education program coordinator, Julie Webber, helps people learn to shop, clip coupons, and stretch meals with inexpensive, nutritious ingredients. In addition, Webber devises suggested recipes to include the diverse (and sometimes odd) donations distributed to clients. "If we get a lot of pumpkin mix, for instance," says Forsthoefel, "Julie will figure out easy recipes for pumpkin bars or pumpkin soup that our clients can do themselves."

Do food bank clients want more organics?

"Last month, we had 40 palettes of Amy's organic frozen pizza," Moran says. "They went fast."

## GROW YOUR OWN

Growing Gardens is a Portland-based organization that provides assistance to low-income people who want to grow their own food. It began in the mid-1980s, established itself under its current name in 1996, and went nonprofit five years ago.

"Since 1996, we've installed 485 home gardens [in Portland]," says Debra Lippoldt, the group's executive director. "Typically, we do 40 to 50 per year, and we include lots of options—traditional gardens, raised garden beds, container gardens. We provide seeds, some supplies, and if the gardener is interested, we'll hook them up with a mentor and help them build a compost worm bin."

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Growing Gardens is supported by a broad network of sources, including foundation grants, fundraising events, and individual donations. Some Portland businesses also donate seeds, compost, and other materials. The group's requirements are few; gardeners must be Portland residents, with a family income of no more than 185% of the federal poverty level. "Basically, anyone eligible for food stamps would be eligible," says Lippoldt.

The organization also offers a series of classes and workshops open to the public at large: everything from how to prune and build trellises to basic gardening skills. All the programs have been popular; Lippoldt says there are usually 30-40 people on the waiting list at any one time, which peaks at springtime, when people's thoughts are turning to gardening. She recommends anyone interested apply immediately.

Those who are interested in home gardening tend to stick with the program, according to Lippoldt. Asked about dropout rates, she said, "I don't have any quantifiable information, but we don't have much of a dropout rate. One of the things that happens is that it becomes something around which a family can work together."

## BRIDGING THE GAP

Jessica Chanay mentions a second casualty of the income gap—the emotional poverty of not being able to feed your family the healthy foods they need.

"It is just so frustrating to get to the produce aisle knowing that you have to take that conventional product," she says. "Knowing your children are eating something that's questionable is really hard. It's important to remember the emotional element of that."

Public policy, gardening, and healthier choices: they're all pieces of a complicated puzzle attempting to bridge the gap between poverty and nutrition. *eP*

Kevin Allman is a Portland writer. His website is [www.kevinallman.com](http://www.kevinallman.com).

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