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Food Stamp Sign-Ups Low in N.Y.

Shortfall Exists Despite a Rising Demand for Provisions

By *Michael Powell*
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NEW YORK -- Amid cans of kidney beans and bags of white rice, Denise Conyers sits in her wheelchair at a Manhattan food pantry, plotting to keep the hunger at bay for one more day.

Her food stamp allotment just got cut. She is really not sure why -- she has not been able to work for 20 years.

"It was hard getting food stamps in the first place; they kept asking for more and more paperwork," said Conyers, a fine-cheekboned 53-year-old who was long ago disabled by multiple sclerosis. "Then they said that I make too much on SSI [Supplemental Security Income], so they're cutting my monthly food stamp dollars."

Snarls of red tape, bureaucratic resistance to a "welfare program" and the fact that many New Yorkers are not aware of food stamps have depressed participation here in the federal program. Overall, about 700,000 poor New York residents, more than the entire population of the District, are eligible for food stamps but not



Home health aide Vida Avant, left, helps Denise Conyers, in a wheelchair with multiple sclerosis, turn to the Westside Campaign Against Hunger food pantry to supplement her shrinking food stamp allocation. (By Michael Powell -- The Washington Post)

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enrolled.

New York state ranks 36th in the nation in the percentage of eligible people participating in the program, a low-performing tier that includes some of the nation's most populous states, from Texas and Florida to California and Massachusetts.

The shortfall occurs against a backdrop of rising demand for emergency food in New York and across the nation. Food pantries such as that run by the Westside Campaign Against Hunger -- where Conyers was interviewed -- report a 40 percent spike in demand in the past five years.

This speaks to the paradox of New York. This largest of cities has the densest concentration of millionaires in the nation -- yet 21 percent of the residents live below the poverty line, and some walk the razor edge of hunger.

"Working poor people and immigrants are the fastest-growing groups in New York, and we're failing them," said Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "It's a daily shame."

It also costs New York a small fortune in federal aid. Several recent studies estimate that if 500,000 more New Yorkers signed up for food stamps, it would, in effect, pour \$650 million in federal dollars into local supermarkets and bodegas.

"Hundreds of thousands of low-income New Yorkers miss out on nutrition . . . and the City loses out on hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid," noted a recent study by the Urban Justice Center, a New York-based advocacy group that studied the program for a year.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (R) has vowed to boost food stamp participation. And the number of New Yorkers enrolled for food stamps has increased 30 percent since he took office in 2002.

But the mayor has come late to his embrace of food stamps. Many innovations touted by his administration -- such as allowing

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applicants to file by computer and fax, and streamlining the application -- are common practice elsewhere, even in more conservative states such as Oklahoma, Alaska and Tennessee.