

NEWS & POLITICS

Minnesotans fear food stamp cuts as food shelf visits reach all-time high

More Minnesotans than ever before visited food shelves in 2024 as residents struggle with high food prices and the end of pandemic benefits.

By **Jessie Van Berkel**
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Allissa Malmberg of New Hope visits PRISM's food shelf in Golden Valley on Monday. Malmberg said she has been out of work for months. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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It was standing-room only in the waiting room of PRISM's food shelf in Golden Valley on a Monday morning, as customers awaited their turn to fill a cart with items like eggs, onions, bread and diapers.

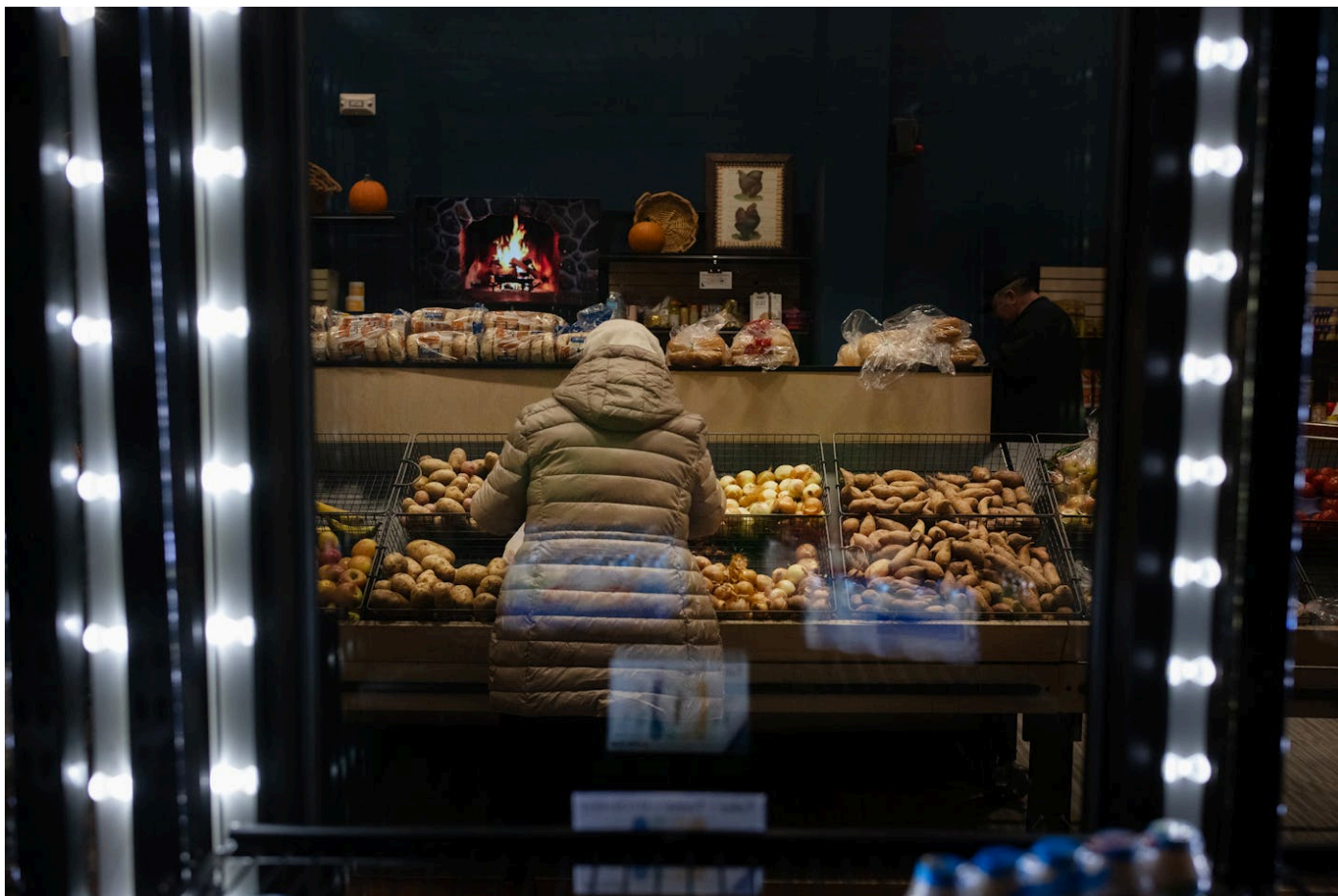
"By the time you pay your rent everything's gone," said first-time visitor Marie Ray-Taylor, 78. She said everything from the price of eggs to her rent has gone "up, up, up ... It's too much."

Rising food prices and higher costs of living, along with the end of pandemic-era benefits, led to another record-breaking year of food shelf visits for the state, with Minnesotans making nearly 9 million visits to places like PRISM last year. That has jumped from around 3.5 million food shelf visits annually before the pandemic.

The number of Minnesotans receiving food stamps, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), has also gone up significantly since 2020. For every one meal distributed through food shelves, nine are provided by SNAP. Many fear possible federal cuts to SNAP benefits could drive even more Minnesotans to food shelves.

Ray-Taylor started receiving SNAP benefits in recent years, after she stopped working.

“I’m so worried,” the Brooklyn Park resident said of potential cuts. “Who knows what’s going to happen?”



A woman shops for vegetables during a visit at PRISM’s food shelf on Monday in Golden Valley. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

The recent U.S. House budget blueprint directed the Agriculture Committee to cut \$230 billion. Exactly what that could mean for the food benefit program remains to be seen and budget talks have a long way to go. However, the majority of the spending that committee

oversees goes to the SNAP program.

Minnesota expects to get \$1.6 billion from the SNAP program in the current fiscal year, State Budget Director Ahna Minge recently told lawmakers. The program provides food assistance for 456,000 low-income Minnesotans, including families, older adults and people with disabilities. The average benefit is \$6.16 per day.

“The federal safety net is such a dramatic piece of this puzzle,” said Sophia Lenarz-Coy, executive director of The Food Group, which runs a food bank and supports sustainable farming. She said potential cuts to SNAP “would dramatically change the demand for food shelves that are already well beyond the capacity that many of them were sort of designed to meet.”

Amid the federal uncertainty, state lawmakers are being pressed to step up funding. Legislators and DFL Gov. Tim Walz devoted one-time dollars to bolstering the state’s system of food shelves in recent years, Lenarz-Coy said, and advocates hope to persuade state lawmakers to continue the financial support.

Food prices rose 28% from 2019 to 2024 and the end of emergency SNAP benefits in March 2023 left people with about \$100 less per month, Department of Children, Youth, and Families Commissioner Tikki Brown said at a recent news conference held by Lenarz-Coy’s New Hope-based nonprofit.

“For the fourth consecutive year, we are looking at a record-breaking number of food shelf visits in Minnesota,” Brown said. “It’s clear that food shelves and hunger relief programs play a necessary role in supporting Minnesotans who are struggling, especially as the cost of living continues to rise.”

The spike in visits to food shelves was seen statewide, in rural and metro communities. The Food Group’s Statewide Food Access Manager Jill Westfall noted data from 487 food shelves across the state show increased visits from all age groups last year – adults, children and seniors.



PRISM employee Kenny Gilman stocks the shelves with dairy products on Monday. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Minnesotans who visit food shelves say they are having to choose between food and other expenses, like utilities, transportation, housing and medical costs, according to a 2022 survey.

Food shelves are struggling to keep up with the demand.

PRISM has seen a “staggeringly high” number of first-time visitors, with 20 to 30 new people each day, Executive Director Michelle Ness said.

Many food shelves now face an additional financial burden as the federal government stopped payments through the Local Food Purchase Assistance program. The program allowed the state to use cooperative agreements to buy local food, largely from socially disadvantaged farmers, and distribute it to underserved communities.

Ness said PRISM expected to receive \$30,000 through the program this year. The organization was notified about three weeks ago that the funding is frozen.

“This is what a lot of food shelves are struggling with,” she said. “I don’t expect it to become available again, but nobody knows.”

Alissa Malmberg of New Hope was among those shopping at PRISM. It had been a while since she’d visited and she tries to stretch what she gets there, she said. She grabbed produce, as well as chicken and coffee.

She had worked as a caregiver and special education assistant, but said she lost her job after a car accident, and then got COVID-19.

“Just a few things happened and they were like, ‘Sorry,’” said Malmberg, who has dealt with other health issues while job hunting. “I just had to live off my savings for a while ... It takes a lot out of you.”

She surveyed her cart as she prepared to check out and estimated it contained more than \$100 of food.

“It’s helpful,” Malmberg said. “For sure.”



Alissa Malmberg browses the shelves at PRISM's food shelf on Monday. (Jerry Holt/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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➤ ABOUT THE WRITER

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Jessie Van Berkel is the Star Tribune's social services reporter. She writes about Minnesota's most vulnerable populations and the systems and policies that affect them. Topics she covers include disability services, mental health, addiction, poverty, elder care and child protection.

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