

Time to Reform Food Stamps
By Glenn Grothman

One of the government programs I've heard complaints about since I've had this job is the food stamp program. The program is supposed to be for poor people with a monthly income of under 130 percent of poverty according to Federal Poverty Guidelines. The program is federally funded but administered by the state and counties. In Wisconsin last year about 300,000 people received food stamps, at a cost of \$233 million.

Observations of people who work in food stores indicate that many people who use food stamps do not act as if they are genuinely poor. Routinely top brand names are purchased instead of generics. While cigarettes cannot be purchased with food stamps, they are routinely purchased by people who use food stamps. While I'm not an anti-smoking fanatic, I've always felt that if you can spend 25 dollars for a carton of cigarettes, you're not poor. The same is frequently true of liquor and beer.

I've interviewed over a dozen people who check out people who pay with food stamps and all felt people on food stamps ate better – or at least more costly – than they did. A store manager up north says she can tell who is on food stamps and who is not by what's in their shopping cart. All had anecdotes about steak or lobsters they would have been reticent to buy themselves. Whether food stamp recipients are getting unreported income, or living with someone with income who social services is unaware of, it's apparent that something is wrong.

Minnesota is currently asking the federal government to allow it to restrict food stamp purchases. Wisconsin should follow suit for several reasons.

Recent publicity about increasing numbers of overweight Americans highlight that federal programs designed to feed America need to be overhauled. In America, unlike other countries, the poor are heavier than the population at large. Poor children are twice as likely to be obese as children who are not poor. Overweight people are three times as likely to have coronary artery disease and three times as likely to develop type 2 diabetes. As Clinton's Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said, "The simple fact is that more people die in the United States of too much food than of too little, and the habits that lead to this epidemic become ingrained at an early age." This is the first reason to restrict purchases.

It should be remembered that poorer families are frequently eligible for the WIC program as well as school breakfast and lunch as well.

The legislature is always under pressure to increase subsidies for dental care for the poor. The purchase of soda and processed sweets not only is unhealthy, the corollary between these foods and tooth decay is high. Why are we allowing food stamps to be used here?

Finally, any program conditioned on lack of income has a certain amount of moral hazard connected with it. In so far as anything goes in these programs it discourages work. It also encourages cheating to get into the program.

Why has Washington not acted on its own? I spoke with one Washington insider. He had questioned some provisions regarding WIC – food stamps sister program for Women, Infants and Children. He was lectured by a supposedly liberal Congressman that these programs were not for the poor – they were for the producers!! As structured, these programs encourage bad dietary choices, encourage sloth, and insult the hard working. It's time for a change.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058, or in any of the following ways:

Madison Address: P.O. Box 8952, Madison, WI 53708-8952

Home Number: (262) 338-8061

E-Mail: rep.grothman@legis.state.wi.us

WWW: <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/assembly/asm58/news/index.html>