

Opinion: The politics of hunger in the U.S.

By John Packham

It comes as no great surprise that Food Stamps and other means-tested public programs for the poor have emerged as campaign issues during the current election cycle. Expect more of the same as the Republican presidential primary race tightens and the candidates attempt to outduel each other on matters of reducing federal spending and eliminating dependency on “big government.”

Newt Gingrich’s recent labeling of President Obama as “the best food stamp president in American history” follows a time-honored Republican tradition of demonizing programs for the poor and vilifying their recipients – campaign tactics that harken back to Ronald Reagan’s bromides on “welfare queens” and other stereotypes of aid recipients.

After unemployment insurance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – formerly the Food Stamp Program) has historically been the most responsive federal program in assisting families during economic downturns. SNAP is a cornerstone of the nation’s public health safety net and, simply put, our most important anti-hunger program.

The full cost of SNAP benefits is paid by the federal government, with the costs of administrating the program shared between Washington and the states, which operate the program. In Nevada, the average monthly benefit per person is \$123.

Unlike most means-tested benefit programs, SNAP is only available to households with low-income individuals and limited financial assets. Currently, SNAP eligibility is limited to households whose net income is less than or equal

to the federal poverty line (about \$18,500 a year or \$1,545 per month for a family of three) and who possess assets of \$2,000 or less (or \$3,000 for households with an elderly or disabled family member).

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