The Emergency Food and Shelter Program

The Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) is a federal program administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). EFSP was created to supplement and expand the work of local private, nonprofit, and governmental social service organizations that provide assistance to people in economic emergencies. Any organization with a mission to relieve hunger and homelessness is eligible for EFSP funding. Funds may only be used for supplemental feeding, shelter, rent/mortgage assistance, and utility assistance. Since its establishment in 1983, the EFSP has provided over $3.7 billion in federal funds for community organizations to flexibly respond to economic disasters.

EFSP is a relatively small program in the overall federal budget, but agencies and program participants rely on the funding. It is an indispensable resource to help people stay in their homes and pay their utility bills. In addition, the money provided by EFSP keeps food on the shelves of food pantries, shelters, and soup kitchens.

ELIGIBLE PROGRAM COSTS

- Food, food vouchers, gift certificates marked “Food Only or Food and Diapers Only”
  - Limited purchase of dessert/special event items
  - Seeds and canning supplies
  - Hot meals: Direct reimbursement of actual eligible costs
    OR per diem allowance of $2/meal served

- Transportation
  - Delivery/distribution of purchased/donated food
  - Transporting clients to mass shelters

- Shelter
  - Direct reimbursement of actual eligible costs OR per diem allowance of $7.50 or $12.50/person/night
  - Hotel/motel costs (room and tax only) if no appropriate mass shelter is available

- Consumable supplies
  - Essential to mass feeding (tableware, utensils, boxes, bags)
  - Essential to mass shelter (toothbrushes, soap, cleaning supplies)

- Basic first aid supplies
• Equipment not exceeding $300/item
  o Kitchen equipment
  o Shelving and storage containers
  o Bedding, cots, linens

• Rent/mortgage assistance/eviction prevention (maximum of one month)
  o Client must be a resident of the home or apartment AND responsible for the rent/mortgage payment
  o Late fees, legal fees, deposits, and condo fees are ineligible
  o Assistance may only be given on the principal/first mortgage (if 2 mortgages)
  o First month’s rent may only be paid under certain conditions

• Utility assistance (maximum of one month’s billed usage cost for each utility)
  o Limited metered utility assistance (gas, electricity, water, sewer service)
  o Client must be a resident of the home or apartment AND responsible for the utility payment
  o Level billing, budget payments, reconnect fees, and required fees included on the bill are eligible
  o Late fees and deposits are not eligible
  o Limited non-metered utility assistance (oil, firewood, coal, propane)
  o All other resources are exhausted (e.g., State’s Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program)
  o One-time delivery of the minimum amount

WHO DECIDES WHAT FUNDS GO WHERE?

Each year, the EFSP National Board (comprised of representatives from the American Red Cross, Catholic Charities USA, FEMA, The Jewish Federations of North America, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, The Salvation Army, and United Way Worldwide) selects counties across the country considered to be in the greatest need for food and shelter assistance. Indicators of need include poverty statistics and U.S. Department of Labor unemployment figures for the most recent 12-month period. The National Board allocates the amount of money designated for each state based on the prevalence of unemployment and poverty at the county level. A Local Board is formed in each county, which determines eligibility criteria and selects Local Recipient Organizations (LROs) to receive funding. United Way Worldwide reviews Local Board recommendations and distributes the funding awards in two equal installments. Detailed accounting of all program monies is required biannually.

2011: A DRASTIC CUT IN FUNDING

“When you start playing with people’s basic needs, you play with fire.”
- Agency of Butler County

In 2010, $200 million was allocated for EFSP nationally. In 2011, the funding was cut by 40 percent to $120 million. To evaluate the impact of EFSP funding cuts, 18 agencies and 43 program participants representing rural, urban, and suburban demographics in six Ohio counties were interviewed.
“2011 was a horror story.”
“Losing that much funding was like a natural disaster occurred to all LROs.”
“The cuts were devastating. It’s like a slow death.”

-Excerpts from agency interviews in Butler and Huron counties

Currently, the EFSP funding for many counties is the lowest it has been in the history of the program. However, every county has seen a dramatic increase in the demand for services, reaching record highs in some areas of the state.

“Our need has doubled, but our funding has been cut by 75 percent. We are serving twice as many people with one-quarter of the money.”

-Agency of Butler county

Southwest Ohio: Butler and Warren Counties

Six food pantries, soup kitchens, or shelters were interviewed in Butler and Warren counties. The agencies interviewed serve between 502 and 136,000 individuals per year, and have recorded a 10-100 percent increase in the demand for services since 2010. Concurrent to the surge in need among local families, the agencies of Butler and Warren counties faced EFSP funding cuts ranging from 75-87 percent in 2011.

“The American Dream has become three meals a day.”
“In 2010, we helped 130 families stay in their homes. In 2011, we could only help 7.”

-Excerpts from agency interviews in Butler and Warren counties

Every interviewed agency reported allocating some or all of the EFSP funds received for food, although one agency primarily distributes the funding for rent and utility assistance, and another uses the monies predominantly for shelter. No one in need of food is turned away, but agencies testified that the funding cuts have limited the variety of food available at 100 percent of agencies as well as increased the provision of less nutritious food at 83 percent of agencies. Four of the six Butler and Warren county agencies interviewed have also been forced to reduce the quantity of food provided.

“For us, food and nutrition have become the same thing. People need sustenance, so it has become about the calorie rather than the nutritional quality. We won’t turn down cookies, Rice Krispy Treats, and the less healthier foods. It may not be what we want to provide, but food is food. Consider hierarchy of needs. If people are hungry, they can’t do anything.
Ohio's Largest Charitable Response to Hunger
- 2011 ServeOhio Award Recipient -

If children are malnourished, they don’t properly develop cognitively. That compromises them for life.”
-Agency of Butler county

Historically, funding has been evenly distributed between food, shelter, and rent/utility assistance. In 2011, 60 percent of funding went to food, as food was considered the most cost-effective way to help the maximum number of people. Yet despite nearly doubling the usual percentage of funds set aside for food, the amount of EFSP money available for food in Butler and Warren counties still decreased 67 percent from $84,000 in 2010 to $28,000 in 2011. Generous monetary and food donations were received from churches, community funds, community members, restaurants (Olive Garden, Chipotle, Panera Bread) and retail locations (Wal-Mart, Kroger), yet multiple agencies still expressed an inability to keep food on their shelves. Three agencies credited the increased assistance from the local community as the only reason they were able to keep their doors open.

“We are seeing a decrease in funding and an increase in costs everywhere. Last year a truckload of peanut butter cost $34,000. This year it costs $78,000.”

“We are already a refuge. If we close down, where else can people go?”
-Excerpts from agency interviews in Butler county

The Butler/Warren Local Board is unable to apportion money for any new LROs, yet has received a two-fold increase in funding requests from new agencies in the past year. Every LRO previously allotted funds by the Local Board has received a reduction in granted monies, and some agencies have faced elimination of EFSP funding altogether.

“We have always been in the business of stretching the dollar as far as it can go. Now, dollars are being stretched like never before. Despite meager allocations, agencies are extraordinarily generous with their funding. I have heard one agency director tell another more than once to take the first’s share of funding. Agencies are also starting to consolidate and combine to pool resources. But it is still not even close to being enough.”

-Agency of Butler county

At 67 percent of the agencies interviewed, services considered to serve less immediate needs (such as furniture or clothing assistance) have been reduced or eliminated so that more money can be used for the most basic needs. Funding cuts have also led to staffing cuts at 50 percent of agencies, reduced operation hours at 17 percent of agencies, and increased dependence on volunteers at 100 percent of agencies. According to agency representatives, staff members are notoriously overworked, burned out, and underpaid, even paying for operation expenses out of their own pockets.

“We are open the bare minimum number of hours, functioning with the bare minimum number of staff, and spending the bare minimum amount of time with clients.”

“This area is like a dead pond, with 100 people trying to catch 5 fish. Desperation breeds aggression. We have seen a major increase in this town in the crimes of poverty. The incidence of drugs, prostitution, domestic violence, and child abuse are rising rapidly.”

-Excerpts from agency interviews in Butler and Warren counties
North Central Ohio: Lorain and Huron Counties

Nine agencies were interviewed in Lorain and Huron counties. In 2011, the agencies interviewed encountered **funding cuts of between 50 percent and 82 percent** for food, rent, and utility assistance from EFSP. Simultaneous to the severe decrease in funding, 89 percent of agencies reported a substantial rise in the demand for assistance, citing an **increase in need of 15 percent to 134 percent** between 2010 and 2011.

“Our funding is a lifeline for us, and we are a lifeline for this community. But there has been more than once we have almost had to close our doors.”

-Agency of Lorain county

Agencies offering rent and utility assistance could only administer aid to half as many households in 2011 as in 2010, yet saw a **100 percent increase in applications**. All nine agencies interviewed used some or all of their EFSP funding for food, distributed via foodbanks, food pantries, and/or soup kitchens. In 2011, **56 percent of agencies interviewed were forced to decrease the quantity and variety of food offered**, and eight of the nine agencies have reduced or eliminated the meat and fresh produce provided to clients. Five of the nine agencies interviewed believe they are now serving less nutritious food. Two agencies also reported a reduction in the facility’s hours of operation and in the number of paid employees, as well as the elimination of non-basic need services, specifically financial and education-related programs.

“People are hungry. They need food. Sometimes we can only provide food, not nutrition. We are forced to rely on what is donated. But when you do that, you lose control over the type of food provided. So we give what is available, rather than what we want to give.”

“We can only afford to rent our building, so every evening we have to move all of our food into our office. It means we cannot provide anything that is not shelf-stable or needs refrigeration.”

“We have a huge increase in need, but we cannot afford any more staff. Everyone just works that much harder. But it changes our ability to help people in a broader way. We have less time to discuss a person’s overall situation because all we can focus on is meeting their minimum basic needs.”

-Excerpts from agency interviews in Lorain county

Two agencies recognized a surplus of funding from other sources (community funds, grants, nonprofit foundations, and personal and business donations) as critical contributors in filling in some of the gaps left by EFSP funding.
“People are extremely generous, and we are so thankful. But depending on a surplus of generosity is not sustainable, because eventually it comes to an end. If generosity could keep up with need, no one would be hungry. Those who used to support us are now standing in line.”

-Agency of Huron County

Central Ohio: Franklin & Fairfield Counties

Three agencies were interviewed in Franklin and Fairfield counties. In Central Ohio, funding from EFSP is directly responsible for the provision of up to 3 months of food per year, comprising 5-25 percent of the budget of the agencies interviewed. Agencies reported a 50 percent increase in need for services since 2010. In 2011, one agency interviewed served 1,438,000 hot meals (12,000 meals/day) and distributed 320,000 pounds of pantry food for 72,000 families (85 families/day). Agencies have documented a reduced availability and provision of protein sources due to the decrease in EFSP funding, as high-quality protein is the most expensive food to purchase and the least donated. To make up for the deficit, clients are instead supplemented with breads and pastries.

“Cuts in funding mean more bread, less protein. Which means more diabetes.”

“When we have fresh fruits and vegetables, it’s like a stampede.”

“For 3 weeks, the only vegetable we had was pickles.”

-Excerpts from agency interviews in Franklin and Fairfield counties

Agency representatives report that any further decrease in funding would result in fewer staff members and decreased operation hours, compromising the quality of service clients receive. They already rely very heavily on volunteers, but one to three paid staff members are essential for management duties.

“The poor are the easiest targets; they have no strong lobbying arm. How long can we continue to take from those who have nothing?”

-Agency of Franklin county

The Impact of EFSP Funding Cuts on Individuals

Forty-three program participants were interviewed in Central Ohio. Clients cited unemployment, illness or disability, and rising costs of essential services as the main reasons for utilization of assistance services. On average, pantry food accounted for about 49 percent of clients’ overall food intake, though about half of the individuals interviewed also receive assistance from programs such as SNAP and WIC. Sixty-three percent of clients have noticed changes in services attributable to EFSP funding cuts, specifically noting fewer fresh foods, less variety, and a reduced quantity of food provided. Sixty-one percent of clients expressed a need for more fruits, vegetables, and meat, and half of clients believed they need more dairy products. Agencies and clients report larger family sizes due to the combination of households to cut costs, and a
significant increase in the number of senior citizens and children under 17 requiring help with their basic needs.

“I’ve been locked in a custody battle for four years. It has taken all of my savings, and my children are suffering. The worse off I get financially, the less likely I am going to be able to get custody of my kids. The less likely they are to be safe. My daughter has a mental condition and my son was molested. They have to be safe. I will do anything to make that happen. Getting help with my rent and food is the only way that I can keep fighting for them.”

“We couldn’t make ends meet when there were 4 of us in the house. Then my daughter came, told me the drugs had taken over, and left my 4 grandchildren on the doorstep. Our family size went from 4 to 8 overnight.”

“I’ve been disabled for twenty years. I lost my job because I hurt my back. But with my job went my health insurance. I can’t afford the surgery I need, and I can’t get a job until I have surgery.”

“Without this place, my babies wouldn’t be fed. There is nothing worse than hearing your child cry because they have an empty belly. It’s the worst thing as a parent to hear that, and know that you have nothing in your cupboards.

“I’ve asked myself, “Will not eating or not having my prescriptions kill me first?” Because I know in times like these, I can’t have both.”

“I found out a few years ago I have diabetes. Both my brother and my mom died of diabetes. My brother was only 23. I don’t understand very much about diabetes, but I know mine is out of control. I eat what I can find, and that’s a lot of carbs. I can’t afford to see the doctor.”

-Individuals of Franklin and Fairfield counties