

USE OF FOOD STAMPS STAYING



One out of every six households in the state of Tennessee is receiving help from the United States government as we celebrate Thanksgiving weekend. The state of Tennessee is second only to Oregon in the share of households receiving food stamps during the year 2010. Food stamps are also referred to as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Payments (SNAP). In 2010, 45 states offered more federal help with food according to the United States Bureau of Census, which increased the number of households in the country receiving food stamps to 13.6 million. "All states have experienced increases in SNAP participation over the past several years," said Nathalie Essex, legislative coordinator at the Tennessee Department of Human Services. "The increases have been driven by the downturn in the economy." In 2010, 17 percent of Tennessee residents participated in the country's food stamp program according to the new United States Census report released. This number increased from the 15.3 percent of participation back in 2009. At 17.9 percent, the state of Oregon had the highest participation of food stamp participants. The states with the lowest participation in food stamps are California, New Jersey and Wyoming. As wages reduce and living costs increase, more and more families across the country are relying on food stamps as a safety net. Tennessee sees 24 percent of SNAP households have a member of the household working. According to federal documents, 40 percent of food stamp participants have a family member who is employed. Chattanooga has 20,960 persons, accounting for 7.9 percent of all possible workers, are unemployed in October. This was true despite the fact that the October unemployment numbers fell to its lowest level in close to three years. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the federal food stamp program has increased 70 percent since the economy tanked almost four years ago. Participation in Tennessee grew by 31 percent over the past four years. "(They) are responsible for providing information, at the local community level, to insure that people are kept aware of the program and their potential eligibility for assistance," Essex said. As more and more people use food stamps, fraud has become a major concern all across the country. The executive director of the Chattanooga Community Kitchen, Charlie Hughes, says that people are selling their food stamps for a price lower than what they are worth in cash. "What we tell them is you can't buy food stamps from someone else," Hughes said. "You can't take someone else's food stamps." Court documents in Oregon reveal that a grocery store owner was indicted for purchasing food stamps at half their cost and then cashing them in for their full worth. According to the Wichita Eagle, 13 people at two different grocery stores were indicted for food stamp fraud. Food stamp fraud is punishable with up to 20 years in prison if financial gains total more than \$5,000 to go along with a \$250,000 fine.

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