

People on food stamps to receive less assistance

In a region stalked by hunger, putting food on the table will soon get even harder for the poorest families. Come Nov. 1, everyone on food stamps in Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties — more than 187,000 people — will get less money for groceries. The amounts vary, but a family of four will lose \$36 a month when the 2009 Recovery Act expires.

For Gloria Domingo, who'd come with her 2-year-old, Ramiro, to apply for aid at the east Fort Myers United Way House earlier this week, the news was like a slap. "I have two others in school and it's already hard enough to keep them full. How am I going to feed them if they give us less?" the 31-year-old Guatemalan-born woman asked. "It's more we need — not less."

Seventy-four-year-old retiree Estela Ramirez, who'd trundled in with her walker, 2-year-old granddaughter Olivia in tow, was more stoic: "What can we do?" she asked, shaking her head. "I stretch it already; I'll just have to stretch it even more."

These cuts are separate from a House bill passed last week that slashes \$40 billion in food stamps over the next decade by kicking more than 3 million people off the rolls entirely and reducing benefits to 850,000 more, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

These are grim tidings in a region that remains hard-hit economically. A national study released earlier this month showed three in 10 households with children in the Fort Myers-Cape Coral area can't afford the food they need. The area had more struggling families than all but two other U.S. metropolitan areas: Lakeland-Winter Haven and Bakersfield, Calif., according to the Food Research and Action Center, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.

Nationally, almost 48 million people use \$75 billion in food stamps (officially the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) annually, and in Florida, 3.6 million people — about 1 in 5 get them. Last week, the White House called food stamps one of the "nation's strongest defenses against hunger and poverty," while threatening a veto.

"Readers should not get overly worried at this point," said Terry Field of Florida's Department of Children and Families, which administers the program statewide. "What passed in the House is not likely to pass in the Senate. It's probably much more severe than what will actually come out. But I'd rather wait 'til the final bill passes to speculate."

Phyllis Jacoby, however, is quite willing to look into the future, and what she sees is bleak, even without any congressional cuts. "Our families live in the now, so they might not see what they're missing until a few months (after Nov. 1)," says Jacoby, director of prevention services for the Children's Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida, which runs the east Fort Myers United Way House, "but they'll feel it. It means 21 meals a month that won't be there. So who doesn't eat and when? How do you make that decision?" What especially galls Jacoby are critics who portray the program as riddled with fraud and waste. She cites a recent USDA study that showed SNAP payments reach 96 percent of correct recipients. (By comparison, Social Security payments have a 91 percent accuracy rate.) She points out that most of the people who use food stamps are children and seniors — "not a bunch of people loafing around, smoking joints and not working. It is kids. It's the elderly. It's families in deep poverty." The idea of considering further cuts when most recipients already find the benefits inadequate makes Jacoby sputter. "It's just absurd. Do you know old people getting a \$642 Social Security check get only \$16 in

food stamps — \$16? They can't even buy their Ensure with that."

The November cuts will be hard enough, says Matlacha resident Rose Bohley; losing food stamps entirely would be disastrous. She's the sort of person the House bill targets: a 50-something unemployed adult with no children at home. Bohley came here from Ohio in 2011 when her brother died and she inherited his small trailer. She's been barely scraping by ever since. "This is the brokest I've ever been," she says. "I have no health insurance. The car battery died and it took me a month to get the money together to replace it. I have no AC and the water heater's broken; so is the dryer." She'd been working at Kmart, but can't stand all day anymore because of her heart condition and diabetes; so far, Bohley hasn't found another job. She uses her food stamp money — about \$6 a day — to buy some of the meat, fresh fruit and vegetables she needs to stay healthy, but those dollars don't go nearly far enough, she says. "I think those bureaucrats need to walk a month in my shoes before they go making cuts," she says.

Whatever happens, agencies will have to deal with more hungry people. Even more moderate cuts — Harry Chapin Food Bank president Al Brislain is guessing about \$10 billion — will place the regional nonprofit in crisis mode, scrambling to fill new gaps. "To be anywhere meeting the need (would take) about 15 million more pounds — almost double where we are now," Brislain says. His strategy for narrowing the gap? "To maximize our donated food from the store pick-up program and from local/regional fresh produce packers." Beefing up his corps of volunteers and finding ways to pack and transport food would get them two-thirds of the way there, he says. "At this point, that would be a pretty good start, given we were only distributing 3.5 million pounds. Of course, if the SNAP cuts are deep, we will need to find even more food more quickly."