



# The Poverty Diet: Your Life on \$4.23 a Day

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PRAY.  
ACT.**

March 2011

## Introduction

How much did you spend on food today? Did you eat out? If you added up the total cost of everything you ate and drank today – breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, dessert – whether you brown bagged it or ordered a la carte would it total less than \$5? Now, how much do you have left over for your other costs? Welcome to poverty.

In 2005 we launched *The Poverty Diet*, a three-day, experiential program designed to help people think about what it means to be poor in Virginia and about some of the public policies in place to support people – individuals and families – living at or below the poverty line. Through our partnership with the national Half-in-Ten campaign (halfinten.org), we have revised and updated *The Poverty Diet* to bring this experience current with the latest data on the massive expansion of poverty and increased reliance on public supports as a result of the Great Recession.



No experience can fully embrace the reality of life at or below the poverty line. *The Poverty Diet* aims to get us out from behind the quantitative analysis of poverty and into the realm of life experience to try to comprehend for a moment the day-to-day reality for hundreds of thousands of our neighbors: the challenge of maintaining a healthy, nutritious and balanced diet on less than \$5 a day.

## Poverty

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one of the largest single-year increases in national poverty on record occurred in 2009, with poverty rates jumping to 14.3 percent from 13.2 percent in 2008. In Virginia poverty rose from 10.3 percent to 10.7 for that year. Over 157,000 Virginians have joined the ranks of the poor since the recession began in 2007.

## Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program

SNAP, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, is a public program designed to help individuals and families living in poverty afford basic food necessities.

In 2010 more than 786,157 individuals received SNAP benefits in Virginia, that's an increase of over 100,000 people from 2009. The average food stamp benefit was \$128.63 per person per month. This equates to approximately \$4.23 per person per day! Less than \$5.

## The Poverty Diet: How It Works

*The Poverty Diet* is a three-day, experiential learning program. Participants can spend no more than \$4.23 per person per day

(or \$12.69 over the 3 day period) on food and beverage items. Ideally, all food should be purchased only at stores that display the "Quest" logo or a picture of the EBT card, e.g. 7-eleven, Food Lion, Kroger, Martins, and other convenience and grocery stores. Participants should refrain from eating or drinking any food items purchased at an earlier time, such as items in your food pantry. Before you begin be sure to study the food stamp guidelines, sample meals, and other pertinent statistics in this pamphlet.

Each day, participants document what they eat and what it cost on the Daily Diet Log. In addition, each Daily Diet Log presents personal stories and statistics concerning hunger and poverty, and an opportunity to make notes of your thoughts and reflections.

We hope that through this experience you will gain a newfound understanding of the difficulties related to poverty and nutrition.

*Caution: If you are pregnant or have any health concerns, please consult your physician about participating in The Poverty Diet.*

**You are allocated  
\$4.23 per person  
for all food  
consumed today.**

# Daily Diet Log: Day 1

You are allocated \$4.23 per person for all food consumed today.

## What did you eat?

**Breakfast:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lunch:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dinner:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

Total: \_\_\_\_\_

## Read Bonnie Chambers' story:

My husband, James, and I have four children between the ages of one and 15. James used to make a decent living as a drafter, making over \$15 an hour with benefits. In 1999, he was laid off, and since then he has had a difficult time finding work. The last job he held was at Rite Aid, working for \$10 an hour. However, he had to quit because his schedule kept getting switched around and we were paying too much in daycare when we both had to work at the same time.

We are receiving SNAP benefits, but not enough. When James was working at Rite Aid and bringing home about \$1,300 a month (for a family of six), we received \$120 in SNAP benefits. James and I only ate one meal a day then. We were always hungry. We wanted our children to eat, so we didn't. Now that James is out of work our SNAP amount has gone up, but not by very much. We go to the food bank, but you can only go once a month. Plus we don't have a car, which makes it difficult because the food bank isn't close by. If my family had enough to eat, things would be less stressful and we would be able to do more to change our situation. I feel like I am dealing with crisis after crisis now and not making any progress.

## Did You Know:

- SNAP eligibility: In order to qualify for SNAP benefits, a family of four must have an annual net income of less than \$22,056.
- Most SNAP recipients are children or elderly: As of 2006, almost half—(49%)—are children and another 9% are age 60 or older.
- Many households receiving SNAP in Virginia do not receive cash welfare benefits: Only 9.9% receive welfare (TANF – Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) cash assistance; and 9.9% of SNAP households have earned income from work.

- If you make minimum wage, what is left for food?: In central Virginia, a worker earning minimum wage (\$7.25/hour) must work 99 hours per week in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment at the fair market rent of \$958. If a person works 40 hours a week making minimum wage, he or she can only afford a monthly rent of \$377. What money is left to spend on food for their family?

## Reflection at the end of the day:

What was the most difficult aspect of eating on only \$4.23 today?

# Daily Diet Log: Day 2

You are allocated \$4.23 per person for all food consumed today.

## What did you eat?

**Breakfast:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lunch:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

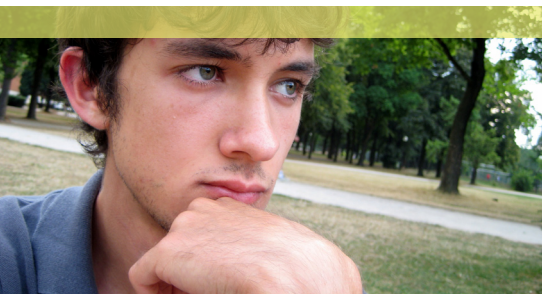
**Dinner:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

Total: \_\_\_\_\_

## Read Carol Ann Hovland's story:

My name is Carol Ann Hovland, and I am a disabled woman. I have a limited income of \$548 a month, which comes from both Disability and Social Security. In addition to this money, I have a Section 8 subsidy for my housing, and I currently receive \$36 a month in SNAP benefits. Most months the benefits are all I have to buy food. My income barely covers my rent, utilities, medications, upkeep of my car, and household and personal items that SNAP benefits cannot be used for. With increasing utility costs, my income probably won't even cover these necessities next winter.

The lack of enough SNAP benefits has had a big impact on my life. I eat mostly carbohydrate-based foods because that is all I can afford to buy. I get very little protein, and as a result, I am tired all the time. My overall health has deteriorated and my immune system doesn't protect me like it should. Living with a disability has impacted my life enough, but not having enough food and a balanced diet is an added burden I can hardly bear. I believe that if I was able to receive more assistance, I could eat a more nutritious diet and improve my health and quality of life.



### Did You Know:

- Disabled individuals: Almost one-quarter of SNAP households include non-elderly individuals with disabilities.
- SNAP households possess few resources: The average SNAP household possesses only \$101 in countable resources (including the non-excluded portion of vehicles and the entire value of checking and savings accounts and other savings).
- SNAP households in Virginia have little income: Only 13.5% of SNAP households are above the poverty line; the average monthly household gross income is \$683; families receiving SNAP benefits spend, on average, \$428 per month for shelter; and after shelter costs, only \$255 is left for healthcare, transportation, utilities, childcare, food and other expenses.

### Reflection at the end of day 2:

What was the nutritional content of what you ate today as compared to your normal diet? How did your diet today compare with the recommendations in the USDA Food Pyramid?

## Daily Diet Log: Day 3

You are allocated \$4.23 per person for all food consumed today.

### What did you eat?

**Breakfast:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lunch:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dinner:** \_\_\_\_\_ Cost: \_\_\_\_\_

Total: \_\_\_\_\_

### Read Yolanda Hernandez's Story:

I am 26 years old and a single mother of a 4-year-old boy. I work about 37 hours a week at an assisted living home for the elderly, right down the street from where I live. I bring home about \$900 a month after taxes. I receive SNAP benefits, but I only get \$10 a month to help with food expenses. This amount just isn't enough when I am paying for rent, utilities and other expenses, like keeping a growing boy in clothes that fit him. I only eat two meals a day. I always put my son first, and he needs to eat so that he grows up healthy and strong.

I would like to go to school and work part time so that I can get out of working minimum or just over minimum wage jobs, but I cannot cut down on my hours to do this. I need every penny to

get by. If I got a food benefit that actually reflected my actual take-home pay and not what I make before taxes, I would be able to get more food and eat regular meals. I shouldn't have to skip meals when I am working hard, following the rules and doing everything I can to provide a home for my son.

### Did You Know:

- Working-age women: There are almost two times more working-age women utilizing SNAP benefits than working-age men.
- Single-parent households: About one third (32%) of all households in Virginia utilizing SNAP are single adults with children.
- The benefit application: The application for benefits (including SNAP) is 18 pages long. After filing, applicants must submit to an in-person or telephone interview.
- Food insecurity: 9.2% of Virginia's households are "food insecure," which means that they lack access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources.

### Reflection at the end of day 3:

What insight(s) have you gained through your participation in *The Poverty Diet*?



- Grains Make half your grains whole.
- Vegetables Vary your veggies.
- Fruits Focus on fruits.
- Oils Most people get enough oil in the foods they eat.
- Milk/Dairy Get your calcium-rich foods.
- Meat/Beans Go lean with protein.



## Additional Information

### SNAP Guidelines

What can I buy with SNAP benefits?

- Any food or food produce, except for ready-to-eat hot foods
- Prepared cold sandwiches or salads that will not be eaten in the store
- Baby formula, goat's milk, Pedialyte, and Pediasure
- Seeds and plants used to grow foods, including fruit trees
- Fresh produce items from authorized vendors
- Meals prepared and delivered by a meal delivery service such as Meals on Wheels
- Meals at meal sites such as soup kitchens
- Nutritional supplements such as Ensure, Isomil, Boost, and Sustacal
- Weight loss products such as Dynatrim, Slim Fast, Cambridge Diet, and Nutrisystem
- Artificial sweeteners
- Distilled water
- Ice
- Lactaid caplets and Lactaid milk
- Cooking sprays, such as Never Stik and Pam

What can I not buy with SNAP benefits?

- Ready-to-eat hot foods
- Foods to be eaten on the store premises
- Pet foods
- Soap or paper products or other non-food items
- Alcoholic beverages and tobacco products

### Sample Meals

When participating in *The Poverty Diet*, everything you consume (food and beverages) over a three-day period must cost less than \$12.69. Most likely, you will not be able to afford:

- juice, most soft drinks, coffee, or alcoholic beverages;
- many fresh fruits; or
- some fresh meats such as seafood, roasts, steak, or deli lunch meat.

The following are some suggestions for low cost meals.

#### Breakfast

- Oatmeal
- Banana
- Grits

#### Lunch

- Peanut butter and jelly sandwich
- Ramen noodles
- Chef Boyardee
- Canned lunch meat

#### Dinner

- Macaroni and cheese
- Rice and beans
- Baked beans and hot dogs
- Tuna fish

#### Beverages

- Tap water

## Financial Comparisons

(All figures are per capita)

The data below reflects the USDA's estimates regarding the average SNAP benefit per capita in Virginia in 2010. The "Average Food Expenditure" is the USDA Economic Research Service's estimates on the average per capita food expenditures in the United States in 2009.

	Daily	Monthly	Annually
SNAP Benefit in VA	4.23	128.63	1543.56
Average Food Expenditure	10.76	327.42	3929.00

### The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Virginia

The self-sufficiency standard is the amount of money it takes for families to live and work without public or private assistance or subsidies, aside from tax credits. Every metropolitan statistical area across the Commonwealth has a self-sufficiency standard. A condensed version for Richmond is below. You can find all the tables online here:

[http://www.vakids.org/pubs/FES/VA\\_SS\\_2006.xls](http://www.vakids.org/pubs/FES/VA_SS_2006.xls).

Monthly Costs	Adult	Adult + infant	Adult + preschooler
Housing	597	667	667
Child Care	0	475	492
Food	210	307	318
Transportation	65	65	65
Health Care	106	306	304
Miscellaneous	98	182	185
Taxes (-)	210	343	359
Earned Income			
Tax Credit (-)	0	-75	-67
Child Care			
Tax Credit (-)	0	-73	-73
Child Tax Credit (-)	0	-83	-83
Self-Sufficiency			
Wage Hourly	\$7.31	\$12.01	\$12.31
Monthly	\$1,287	\$2,114	\$2,167
Annual	\$15,442	\$25,367	\$25,999

### About the Virginia Interfaith Center

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy is Virginia's oldest faith-based advocacy group. We are a nonpartisan coalition of faith communities working to create progressive public policy by engaging people of faith, educating the public about social issues, the legislative process, and the call to advocacy. Our work is supported through the generosity of individuals, congregations, religious groups and the following philanthropic foundations: The Public Welfare Foundation; The Moriah Fund; and The Center for American Progress. We are the state affiliate of the national Half-in-Ten Campaign and are the state public policy office in Virginia for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Contact us at 804-643-2474.

