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\$1.33 per meal: Could you do it?

Enterprise staff
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Could you live on a \$20 food stamp budget for a week?

In an effort to help raise hunger awareness in the face of a state budget crisis, Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, D-Davis, is taking on the "Food Stamp Challenge" for the third year in a row — her second as a state legislator.

The challenge asks participants to live for one week on the nation's average weekly food stamp benefit of \$4 per day, or \$1.33 per meal. Yamada will blog about her experiences while taking the challenge. Follow her on the Yolo County Food Bank website, <http://yolofoodbank.blogspot.com>.

"California faces a budget crisis that will affect millions of citizens, especially those with the lowest incomes and greatest need," Yamada said in a news release. "By taking this challenge, I hope to draw attention to those in hunger, and urge the governor to take notice and not cut these essential programs."

The rules are simple: Eat breakfast, lunch and dinner spending only \$1.33 a meal for five days, or \$20 total. The challenge is whether healthy and tasty meals can be prepared on the grocery budget of millions of Americans receiving food stamp benefits.

Yamada began her challenge Monday and will continue through Friday. So far she has spent \$19.24 on the following:

2 packages of ground turkey — buy one, get one free: \$4.99

2 bananas, 0.98 pounds @ 79 cents per pound: 77 cents

2 roma tomatoes, 0.40 pounds @ \$1.99 per pound: 80 cents

1 package whole mushrooms: 99 cents

1 package fresh spinach: 99 cents

1 package extra firm tofu: \$1.25

2 ready-made deli sandwiches @ \$1.99: \$3.98

1 loaf potato bread: \$1.49

1 package angel hair pasta: 99 cents

6 cartons of yogurt, sale price of three for \$1: \$2

1 package ground coffee, 1.5 ounces: 99 cents

Yamada said her trip to the supermarket required more time and thought than usual.

"I spent 45 minutes hunting for bargains, putting items in and out of the cart because they exceeded my budget," she said. "At least three supermarket employees asked if I needed any help or if I was having trouble finding anything. When I explained the challenge — to live on a food stamp budget for five days — they were all sympathetic, with one not aware that the allotment was so little, \$4 a day.

"While this challenge is a short-term choice for me, it is a way of life for millions of Americans."

The Federal Food Stamp Program, re-named the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2008, helps feed more than 2 million low-income Californians, more than half of whom are children and 8 percent of whom are over 60 years of age.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2009 the nationwide average monthly benefit was \$124.45 per person — up \$20 from 2008 due in part to American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds and other Obama administration programs.

The California Food Assistance Program provides state-funded monthly benefits to legal residents between 18 and 65 years of age who have lived in the United States for less than five years, but otherwise meet all federal food stamp eligibility requirements.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed cutting this program, Yamada said, "leaving thousands of Californians without a way to purchase food for their families."