Alaskans invited to take the food stamp challenge

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Fairbanks, Alaska — The University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service is challenging Alaskans to live off the weekly food stamp budget Oct. 9-15.

The food stamp challenge aims to raise awareness of the difficulty of eating well on the food stamp budget. Participants limit their food purchases to the amount of the weekly food stamp benefit, which is $55 for a single Alaska adult who lives on the road system and up to $85 for residents of remote, rural communities. That works out to $8 to $12 a day.

Challenge organizer Helen Idzorek, of the UAF Cooperative Extension Service, coordinates two nutrition education programs that work with low-income Alaskans. She said other states and members of Congress have participated in the challenge.

And it is a challenge, Idzorek said, especially since food stamps are intended to be a supplemental program and bolstered by contributions from wages, food banks and other programs. “Unfortunately, for a lot of people, that’s not the case.”

As of February 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that 76,488 Alaskans received food stamps, or about one in nine residents. Participation in the program has increased substantially in recent years. According to the Division of Public Assistance, Alaska food stamp usage was up by 72 percent for the five-year period that ended July 2011.

All food purchased and eaten during the challenge week must be included in the total. Participants may not eat food from their pantry or freezer and must avoid accepting free food. Idzorek and other Extension nutrition educators are participating in the challenge. She hopes participants will send her their week’s food diary, recipes and strategies they used, as well as comments about the experience, at haidzorek@alaska.edu. These will be used anonymously in a display as part of an Oct. 24 celebration of National Food Day on the UAF campus.


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