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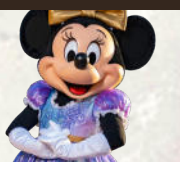
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CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF WALT DISNEY WORLD



Left: Volunteer Cheryl Schettl restocks bins and grocery carts for clients on Sept. 28 at The Salvation Army food pantry is temporarily located at 338 Pearl Ave. in Oshkosh. DAN POWERS/ USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

Below: Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin volunteers Steve Fusfeld, Autumn Lesniak and Amy Kung load boxes of food into vehicles in 2020 in Oshkosh. The food was for those needing help during the coronavirus pandemic. DOUG RAFLIK/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

STOCK THE SHELVES

‘Still struggling’

As benefits cliff looms, volunteers plan for rise in food pantry traffic for those still coming out of pandemic stress

Natalie Brophy and Jessica Rodriguez | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, food insecurity in the country was the lowest it had been in 20 years, though more than 35 million people still struggled. ● In response to millions of Americans losing their jobs after businesses closed or cut their hours to reduce the spread of coronavirus, the federal government bolstered existing programs and started new ones to address the guaranteed increase in food insecurity. ● While Wisconsin did see an increase in need for food during the COVID-19 pandemic, those government programs helped keep the need from spiraling out of control, said Maureen Fitzgerald, the vice president of government relations for Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, the state’s largest hunger relief organization.

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Want to help? Stock the Shelves donation window is open throughout October

Stock the Shelves is an annual fundraising partnership between USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin newspapers and Feeding America.

Last year, thanks to the generosity of readers, nearly \$150,000 was raised through the Stock the Shelves campaign, providing half a million meals to those in need in communities served by the newspaper network: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Appleton Post-Crescent, Green Bay Press-Gazette, Oshkosh Northwestern, Manitowoc Herald Times Reporter, Sheboygan Press, Fond du Lac Reporter, Wausau Daily Herald, Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune, Marshfield News Herald, Stevens Point Journal, Door County Advocate, Oconto County Reporter and Kewaunee County Star-News.

Donations will help support food pantries in the community in which the donor resides.

Checks should be made payable to Feeding American Eastern Wisconsin, ATTN: Stock the Shelves, and mailed to 2911 W. Evergreen Drive, Appleton WI 54913.

Enclose alongside your contribution the donor’s address with city, state and ZIP code for internal processing, a notation of whether the donation should remain anonymous, whether the donation is in the memory of someone special, and the donor’s name as it should appear in the thank-you advertisement to be published in the Thanksgiving edition of USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin’s daily newspapers.

To donate online, visit feedingamericawi.org/stocktheshelvesdonate.

GOP senator won’t hold hearing on redistricting bill

Patrick Marley Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

MADISON – The chairman of a state Senate committee won’t advance non-partisan redistricting legislation even as one of his fellow Republicans calls for a hearing on the bill.

Republican Sen. Dale Kooyenga of Brookfield this week said he wants a hearing on the bill because voters in his



Stroebel

a public hearing,” said a statement from Sen. Duey Stroebel, a Saukville Republican who serves as chairman of the

increasingly purple district are demanding it.

A hearing on Senate Bill 389 almost certainly won’t happen.

“I appreciate Senator Kooyenga’s input, but I do not plan to give SB 389 a public hearing,” said a statement from Sen. Duey Stroebel, a Saukville Republican who serves as chairman of the

Senate Committee on Government Operations.

The standoff over the legislation comes as lawmakers prepare for a court battle over drawing new legislative and congressional districts. The districts must be redrawn every decade to make sure districts have equal populations. Where the lines go can give one political party an upper hand in elections.

The legislation would require the

lines to be drawn by a nonpartisan body instead of legislators.

Lena Eng of New Berlin is among Kooyenga’s constituents who have been speaking out on trying to end gerrymandering that benefits one party.

“I have a strong conservative background. I’m an evangelical Christian and I believe in healthy and fair

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USA TODAY

COVID-19: Lawsuits filed to force doctors to give ivermectin to patients. 13A

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Food pantries

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“There were programs started that were helping people, I think almost putting a finger in the dam of food insecurity last year, and we’ve seen evidence of that,” Fitzgerald said. “We’ve seen people sort of hold steady for the most part for the last year.”

In 2019, around 9% of Wisconsinites experienced food insecurity, according to data from Feeding America. The number rose to nearly 12% in 2020. Feeding America projections estimate in 2021, around 10% of Wisconsin residents will experience food insecurity.

Food insecurity is even more prevalent among children.

In Wisconsin, 14% of children experienced food insecurity, according to Feeding America. That rose to almost 19% in 2020 and Feeding America estimates in 2021, 16% of Wisconsin children will be food insecure.

Some COVID-19 programs that helped bolster people’s finances, such as stimulus checks, enhanced unemployment benefits and the eviction moratorium, have already come to an end this year. As more benefits — including some food programs — continue to wind down, Wisconsinites who are still struggling are being revealed.

“The reason why people, when they’re poor, need hunger relief is because they’ll use all their cash to pay their bills, keep the roof over your head, keep utilities on,” said Sherrie Tussler, the executive director of Hunger Task Force, a food bank in Milwaukee. “And so the one thing you can be flexible with is your food-buying budget.”

Pandemic food programs helped keep Wisconsin households afloat

The program with the biggest impact on Wisconsin families was Emergency FoodShare, Fitzgerald said.

FoodShare is the state’s version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as “food stamps.” When the pandemic hit, the federal government bumped up everyone’s benefits to the maximum possible amount.

For example, a senior citizen getting \$16 a month in FoodShare benefits before the pandemic began receiving the maximum benefit of around \$200 a



Marie Wirch of Oshkosh selects food items to take home from the Oshkosh Area Community Pantry in Oshkosh. DAN POWERS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

month, Fitzgerald said.

The program has helped keep a lot of Wisconsinites fed, Tussler said. In October, 386,000 Wisconsin households benefited from Emergency FoodShare, totaling more than \$72.7 million in benefits, according to the USDA.

Emergency FoodShare is still in effect in Wisconsin. The state has to get approval from the USDA every month to continue the extra benefits. Those extra benefits are set to expire at the end of the year when the federal government’s emergency order lapses, Tussler said.

One program, Pandemic EBT, specifically focused on helping families of children who qualify for free or reduced price meals at school through the National School Lunch Program.

The Pandemic EBT program reimbursed parents to help offset the cost of feeding their children while schools were closed due to the pandemic.

In Wisconsin, 100,000 children in preschool and day cares received \$62 million in benefits, Tussler said, and \$210 million in benefits were paid to the parents of 292,000 school-age kids.

Pandemic EBT is still available for the 2021-22 school year for students if school is closed for five consecutive days or there are reduced attendance hours due to the pandemic.

Another important program was the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm-

ers to Families Food Box program. Through this program, the federal government purchased fresh food from farmers and partnered with distributors, like Feeding America, to get boxes of food out to those in need.

Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin set up distribution sites around the state where people could pull up in their vehicles, pop open their trunks, receive a box full of fresh produce, meat and dairy products, then drive off.

“It really helped people who had never relied on food pantries before and it helped food pantries who didn’t either have capacity because there weren’t volunteers or couldn’t have people inside their facilities,” Fitzgerald said. “Everything was outside and the boxes were helping put money into the economy too because they were partnering with either local farmers.”

That program ended in May. Nationally, more than 173 million boxes of food were distributed, with almost 500,000 of them in Wisconsin, Fitzgerald said.

“These programs were helpful to people during the pandemic, and frankly the pandemic’s not over,” Fitzgerald said. “People are still struggling, people are still coming out of it. And often, it’s the people who are most in need that take the longest to get back on their feet. So when these programs end, it increases need in the community.”

Tussler expects people will start re-visiting food pantries at pre-pandemic levels once pandemic assistance runs out, which could put an extra strain on community food pantries.

But those pantries are trying to plan ahead.

The Hunger Task Force monitors its inventory very closely and plans for the future three, six and nine months in advance, Tussler said. The organization has money available to purchase more food if needed.

“We feel pretty confident that we’ll be able to take care of the community in the way that we need to for the next 12 months,” Tussler said.

St. Joseph Food Program in the Fox Cities is also preparing to meet that increased need, Executive Director Monica Clare said. The Menasha pantry and food bank also has money set aside so they can purchase extra food if they see a big jump in the number of people who need help.

In Milwaukee, Ebenezer Stone Ministries, which serves the city’s South side, saw an increase in need during the pandemic’s peak, according to Mike Hass, food pantry director, and as emergency food programs expire, he too believes it is likely that the need will continue.

Hass said his ministry is prepared, though, and is not worried about emergency food programs running out at the end of the year.

“We have a good relationship with local area businesses,” he said. “Just because some of these programs go away, does not mean that we don’t have other alternatives in getting food.”

The organization partners with organizations such as Hunger Task Force and Feeding America, which will help with a steady food supply to feed hungry families. They also rely on private donations, grants and community donations.

“We are a religious organization,” Hass said. “We put all our faith in God and he always carries through. I have no fear.”

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Jessica Rodriguez is a Report for America corps reporter who focuses on news of value to underserved communities for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Please consider supporting journalism that informs our democracy with a tax-deductible gift to this reporting effort at JOnline.com/RFA.



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