

Rep. Lee highlights food-stamp plight

Oakland Democrat subsisting on \$21 this week, the national average

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Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, walked into a Washington, D.C., McDonald's on Tuesday, ordered a McChicken sandwich, and reportedly was mocked from behind the counter as she asked for ketchup, mustard — and strawberry jam.

But for Lee this week — as it is for millions of Americans every week — getting every possible crumb of food for her buck was no laughing matter. Tuesday marked the start of Lee's "Food Stamp Challenge" in which she'll subsist for one week on \$21, the national average weekly benefit for a food-stamp recipient. That's about \$1 per meal; at \$1.10, even the over-sauced McChicken was busting her budget.

"It is important for the public to understand how many people rely on this program and just how limited their nutrition options are," she said.

The food-stamp program is up for reauthorization this summer as part of the 2007 Farm Bill, which is expected to be enacted by Oct. 1. Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., and Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., who co-chair the House Hunger Caucus, took the challenge last month to highlight their call for another \$4 billion to be added to the current \$33 billion food-stamp budget; that would give a family of four another \$48 per month.

Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, and Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., also took part in the challenge's first round May 15 through 22.

About 65,000 Alameda County residents are enrolled in the food stamp program, and that's only 53 percent of those who are eligible. The program serves about 26 million low-income people across the nation, about half of whom are children and about 8 percent of whom are older than 60. It's meant as a safety net for particularly tough times, and most people leave the program within nine months.

Lee received food stamps while attending college as a single mother of two. But changes to the program made during the welfare reforms of 1996 basically have worn down the stamps' buying power; food prices have increased without the stamps' value keeping pace.

So Lee spent \$13.37 at a Washington, D.C., Safeway supermarket Tuesday, buying a box of vegetable crackers, a can of peas, two cans of beans, tortillas, a loaf of wheat bread, two bananas, a box of hominy grits, a bag of brown rice and a package of chicken thighs.

"I was struck by how hard it is to eat in a healthy manner on a tight budget. I had to put the apples back because they were too expensive. Whole wheat tortillas were twice as expensive as flour," she wrote later Tuesday on the challenge's blog, <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com/> "I got grits instead of oatmeal, and I could not afford to get some of the things I eat every day, like nuts, juice or coffee (even instant coffee was \$4 per container!)."

"So far, so good, although I am already ready for a snack," she wrote.

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