

NINA MOINI: Some legislative hearings at the Minnesota Capitol were canceled today because of the heavy snowfall over the weekend. But about 300 hunger relief advocates are still connecting with lawmakers virtually for what they call Hunger Day on the Hill.

The event is organized by the statewide nonprofit The Food Group and a coalition of about 40 organizations. Advocates are pushing lawmakers to strengthen food access programs, such as funding for food shelves and efforts to help people who could lose SNAP benefits because of federal policy changes. Rachel Holmes is the director of advocacy and community at The Food Group, and she's on the line now to tell us more. Thanks so much for your time, Rachel.

RACHEL Thanks for having me.

HOLMES:

NINA MOINI: So Hunger Day on the Hill, what's happening today? Because you did have to move it virtual because of the weather. But what are you going to be doing?

RACHEL Well, we sure did. But the weather just mirrors the tenacity of Minnesotans today. So we have 300 folks meeting with their lawmakers from all across the state, really to push lawmakers to fight for Minnesota, where everyone has access to the food that they need. So going out there, talking about some key priorities that help people have better access to the food that they need for themselves and their families.

NINA MOINI: Can you give a sense of the scope of the impact of the Minnesotans who are set to be kicked off of SNAP food benefits, since some of those federal government eligibility requirements changed for the program? How is that impacting the work you're doing at the Capitol this year and the work that you're hoping to accomplish?

RACHEL Yeah, well, the H.R. 1, or the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, once it got signed into law, into law in July, we knew that it was going to make really sweeping changes to the SNAP program.

So in Minnesota alone, about 30,000 individuals are now going to be subjected to some really strict red tape and paperwork requirements for the very first time. So that will really risk them staying on SNAP and having consistent access to the program.

We're also seeing a group of lawfully permitted immigrants that are going to be losing access to SNAP altogether. And so in addition to all of those changes for eligibility, their state is also faced with some really hard budget choices.

For the first time ever in the SNAP program history, the state of Minnesota is going to be on the hook to pay for some of the SNAP benefits that folks receive. So we are at the Capitol this year really talking about SNAP in a way that helps lawmakers understand how important this program is and really makes them understand that this is a program that needs continued investment from the state.

NINA MOINI: There are issues you're talking about around funding and qualifying for different programs. There's also issues around access. I mean, for years now, when we've been talking to people who work in this space of food security. They've been saying, this is the highest demand we've seen. This is the hardest time we've seen.

We know that this has been a growing issue, but we also know that a lot of areas of the state, there may not be as much access to a nearby food shelf or a program. What are you looking for in terms of some solutions there just for accessibility?

RACHEL HOLMES:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, Minnesota saw another record year of food shelf visits fourth year in a row, 9 million food shelf visits last year. So we're really looking for the state to invest in the emergency food system here. That is the network of food shelves and food banks across the state that do incredible work to get food to their neighbors and community members.

So investing in additional funding for food for them, for rent, for staffing, these costs that make them able to serve their communities, to have them open their doors, expand their services, do things like home delivery or mobile pop-ups that go into different communities.

To lessen some of those access barriers, that's what this funding will allow the network to do. And so with more state funding, our food shelf partners, our food banks across the state, they're able to really adapt their services to meet the needs of everybody.

NINA MOINI:

Because your group does work directly with food shelves, and you talked about some of the people in the immigrant community, or just people who felt that they needed to hide at home the past few months or so, fears over the surge in federal immigration enforcement officers that were here, how has that changed the way that your organization or your job has been working the past few months?

RACHEL HOLMES:

Yeah, the occupation here in Minnesota of ICE agents has created a ton of fear and uncertainty and harm for so many communities in our state. And the organizations like The Food Group and many others across Minnesota are doing really incredible work to make sure that our neighbors have access to food, but has made it significantly more difficult.

We know that communities of color already are facing disproportionate rates of food insecurity. And crises like this only deepen these inequities. So the work has just pivoted. We have done different intake models. We have expanded home delivery efforts. We have forged new partnerships with local community groups, with different faith communities, really just trying to be nimble and adapt and meet people where they're at the best we can.

NINA MOINI:

Yeah, I hear you talking about a more as much as you can individualized approach for people and creating less barriers. Can you talk just broadly about some of these policy priorities that you are going to be talking with lawmakers and that some of the other people you work with are going to be talking with them about? Because it's across the board. It's from helping seniors to students. Tell me about some of that.

RACHEL HOLMES:

Yeah, absolutely. So like I had touched on, we have two policy priorities that will strengthen the emergency food system here in Minnesota. So investing state funds to bonds to Minnesota's food shelves and food banks are two of our key priority areas. We also have a bill that will address some of the harm done by the federal changes to SNAP and have Minnesota step in to make sure that folks stay enrolled in the program who need it.

And then we also have some bill priorities that we're working on that would provide meals to seniors, medically specific meals to folks who need specifically medical tailored meals, and a bill that would help increase local healthy food into the free school lunch program. So really, all of these bills are connected. They not one is going to end hunger in our state, but they all work together to meet the needs of so many different people.

NINA MOINI: And the shelves or the partners than the programs that you work with-- I know people have different needs in different areas-- but what are you hearing? Are you hearing there just isn't enough, food, and supplies or there isn't staff, or it's just too many people? What are you hearing?

RACHEL HOLMES: It's really across the board, Nina. We always say that if you've spoken to one food shelf or if you've visited one food shelf, you've visited one food shelf. So the needs vary quite a bit. But I will say what we are hearing is that our partners are at capacity.

They want to be able to serve more people, but they just aren't set up to do so. So the emergency food system really relies on SNAP and other nutrition programs to strengthen it. So when one takes a cut, we are all going to take a cut.

So federal changes are really causing a lot of uncertainty for our food shelf partners. But really, they're just doing the best they can to keep their shelves stocked and not have to turn people away or have much longer wait for appointment times.

NINA MOINI: What can somebody listening do right now? A lot of people in Minnesota love to volunteer. They're civically engaged. We've seen a lot of engagement over the past few months or so. But what are you suggesting people do right now? Is it volunteering time? Is it money dollars? Is it items?

RACHEL HOLMES: Yeah, volunteering time is always needed. Our food shelf partners love volunteers. The emergency food system depends on volunteers. So that is a really impactful way to use your time. Donating money is always a great option as well.

Food shelves and food banks can really stretch a dollar. So it's definitely the most impactful way to support a food shelf or a meal program in the state. And then advocating, here, today at Hunger Day on the Hill, we have 300 people using their voice to push for policy solutions that can help. So we, as a community, have a lot of power, and we have power in our voices to push for the change that we need.

NINA MOINI: Well, Rachel, thank you so much for coming by *Minnesota Now*. We hope you'll check in with us again toward the end of the session, and we'll see what happens. Thank you.

RACHEL HOLMES: Yeah, thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: That's Rachel Holmes, director of advocacy and community with The Food Group.