

SNAP Challenge Day #6: Solutions

September 19, 2013



I seemed to find my second wind yesterday. I was really energized by the extremely honest and moving stories many of you shared. It also didn't hurt that I have acclimated somewhat to the change in diet and have made adjustments that help to get me through the day.

Here's a quick recap of Tuesday's menu. I'm still eating vegetarian, which is not really new for me. I am still working on the Toasted Oats as my primary breakfast option. I'll be the first to admit that I wish I had swapped out something else in my cart so I could at least have milk with my cereal or gone with a more filling breakfast option like oatmeal or eggs. As with many things in life, it's all about choice. For lunch and dinner, I again had my homemade soup (consisting of chickpeas, tomatoes and jalapeños). I'm now drinking a lot of water throughout the entire day, which is a shift for me. I never realized how dehydrated I was until I began this challenge. (On a typical week, I'll drink far more coffee and espresso than water.)

In an earlier post, I alluded to how this challenge has, at times, made me feel like an outsider. This occurred again in spades last night, as I attended a late meeting and watched as my colleagues ordered pizza to the office and proceeded to enjoy every last bite. Meanwhile, I indulged on multiple ice waters and my Toasted Oats. What really kept me going was the protein from my chickpea soup.

Your response to my blog has offered confirmation that this effort, as all-consuming as it is, is paying off. While the original aim in documenting my SNAP Challenge was to catalyze awareness, a reporter earlier yesterday asked me about my longer term goals – I wasn't stumped, but “eradicating hunger” seemed like a copout type of answer. Yes, of course, that’s the vision, but I told her that my overarching goal is to get the American public to think about and answer this question:

In what kind of society do we want to live?

Think about that. It’s a really important question. It’s one that has been raised a lot this week as the debate about SNAP and the FARM Bill (along with gun control and other serious issues) rages on in Washington. Do we want to live in a society in which many hard-working fellow citizens are going hungry, or one in which we turn a cold shoulder to the problem? We each need to look inside ourselves and decide.

Relative to SNAP, I want to give voice to a real issue many of you have articulated in your correspondence – that SNAP, though designed as a safety net, has become an entitlement program that is taken advantage of by people who are not in need. One man wrote, “They’re just mooching off the system, can’t you see that?” While undoubtedly there are some who take advantage, I keep trying to bring the conversation back to the real issue. Forty eight million people are hungry in this country -- 48 MILLION. We cannot punish the millions who are confronted every day with anxiety about where their next meal might come from, because of the behavior of what is likely a minority. The point is, I believe we can do better than allow significant numbers of our fellow citizens to go to sleep hungry.

Let me provide an analogy for choosing what to focus on as you think about the issue of food insecurity in America. At Panera, we offer free bathrooms and free WiFi in every bakery cafe. Sure, some people abuse these free services. We have some folks who sit in our stores all day long and use the WiFi without buying anything. Does that mean we should shut down the WiFi for everyone else? No, of course not. The same logic applies to our Panera Cares cafes. Should we shut them down just because some people choose to ignore our philosophy of shared responsibility and eat without leaving a donation? Likewise, do we choose to ignore our neighbors and fellow citizens in pain because of the abuse of some? Clearly, my answer to that is no. Indeed, my belief is that I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

In the meantime, there are a number of programs available, either for people in need or people who want to help. On the ground, there are a few different forms assistance can take:

- Immediate relief – Oftentimes, people just need food to eat. That’s where Feeding America-affiliated food banks, soup kitchens, school meal programs, government

benefits, religious organizations and even meals at [Panera Cares community cafes](#) come into play.

- Education – Other organizations help provide critical information to the food insecure and help people change their behavior. For example, Share Our Strength works through local partners to offer free classes that give people simple tips to stretch their food dollar at grocery stores or teaches basic cooking and meal-planning. Other local service agencies help by simply informing individuals as to whether they qualify for government assistance.
- Skills training – Of course, the best way to combat food insecurity is to attack the root of the problem and ensure that people have good-paying jobs that can keep themselves and their families well-fed. There are thousands of fantastic job-training organizations around the country. Members of my team recently saw a wonderful job-training program in action at St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix, AZ, the world's first food bank.
- Government assistance – Critical programs from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service provide a safety net and supplemental assistance for the food insecure. Programs like SNAP provide nutritional assistance to millions of individuals across the country. In fact, SNAP is the largest program in America's hunger safety net, hands down.

Although I have learned a great deal about hunger, I am not an expert by any means. However, there are some fantastic organizations out there working to make a difference every day. They have significant resources focused on combating hunger. Here are just a few you can check out to learn more:

- [Feeding America](#) is the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity with a nationwide network of member food banks and participants. This robust network of more than 60,000 agency locations distributes 3.9 billion pounds of groceries to 37 million people each year. CEO Bob Aiken is, of course, my partner in undertaking the SNAP challenge this week.
- [Share Our Strength](#) focuses on ending childhood hunger with their No Kid Hungry campaign working to ensure that all children get the healthy food they need every day.
- [Congressional Hunger Center](#) is a nonprofit working to make issues of domestic and international hunger a priority to policymakers.

I've provided just a few examples of the types of solutions out there. If there's one thing I know, it's that we must continue to innovate and create additional solutions to the problem of hunger.

Until tomorrow...