

Answering the Call to End Hunger



A Report to the Community on the Minnesota Food HelpLine

By Sarah Sherman, a 2010-11 Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow

What is the Minnesota Food HelpLine ?

Helping callers make informed choices about their food help options

The Minnesota Food HelpLine provides answers and support to callers across the state who are looking for food help. When a family or individual is in need, we understand that it can be challenging to know where to start looking for help, what programs are out there, and what steps someone needs to take in order to receive assistance. With one call to the Minnesota Food Help-Line, a person can learn about the options available to help them stretch their family's food budget.

We screen callers to see if they might be eligible for Food Support and inform them about the variety of additional food help that is available in Minnesota—such as the Nutrition Assistance Program for Seniors (NAPS), Mothers and Children (MAC), Meals on Wheels, and discount grocery programs. Callers also learn about their local food shelves and on-site meal programs, where they can receive immediate food help.

After the phone call, the caller is mailed a packet that includes an application for Food Support, applications for other programs for which they might qualify, and information on their county office and any local agencies that offer application assistance.



You gave me the application [for Food Support] to fill out and showed me that I could have my application expedited, so I was able to get the help I needed. I've served in the military and worked for over 30 years, and to have help like this – it restores my faith in Minnesota. . . I can't thank you enough.

—recently retired Vietnam Veteran calling from Duluth

Increasing access by breaking down barriers

One of the biggest barriers facing people who need help with food is not knowing that they are eligible for government benefits. The Minnesota Food HelpLine helps fill this need by informing callers of the different programs available and providing a quick, confidential way to see if they might be eligible to receive benefits.

Other barriers that keep people from getting the help they qualify for include myths and misinformation about the programs and their requirements. Many senior citizens mistakenly believe that they will only get \$10 a month, so they decide not to apply. In fact, the average benefit amount for seniors in Minnesota is \$120 a month, with \$16 being the lowest amount of Food Support that someone would receive if they qualified.

Sixty-six percent of people in Minnesota that qualify for Food Support are currently enrolled in the program—reflecting an increase of 8 percent from the beginning of the helpline in June 2009.

source: Minnesota Department of Human Services



SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is the name for the federally-funded food assistance program commonly known as “food stamps.” The name for SNAP in Minnesota is Food Support.

We screen callers for eligibility using *Bridge to Benefits*, an online tool developed by the Children's Defense Fund.

In addition to Food Support, callers to the helpline can also learn if they might be eligible for the following programs:

- MinnesotaCare
- Medical Assistance
- General Assistance Medical Care
- Energy Assistance Program
- School Meal Program
- Child Care Assistance
- Earned Income Tax Credit
- Working Family Credit
- Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

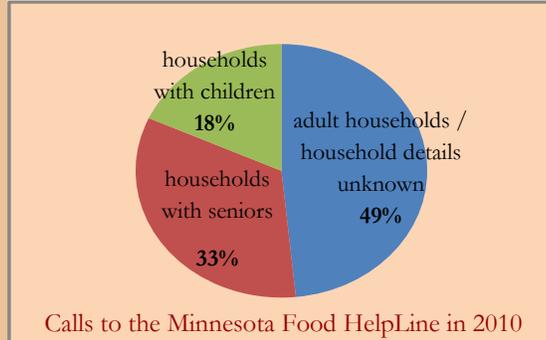
Who calls the Minnesota Food HelpLine?

The helpline receives calls from a wide variety of people across the state. Over half of our calls come from either senior citizens or families with children.

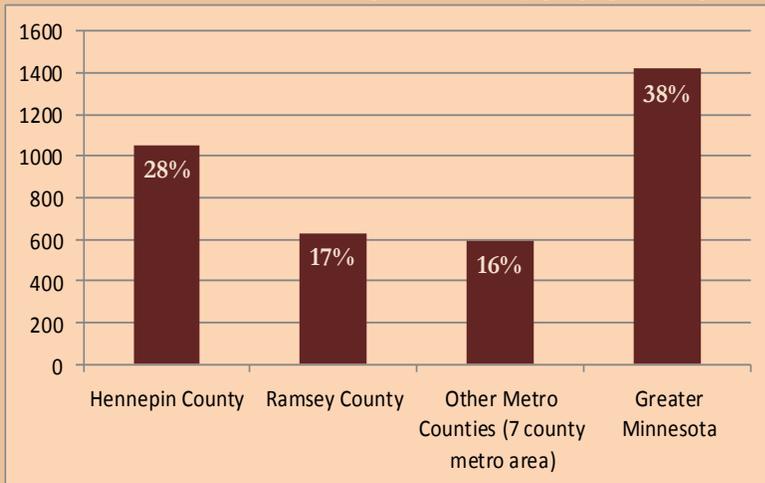
Our most common request from callers is for general information on what food programs are available and how SNAP works. The majority of the rest of the calls come from people who want to know if they might qualify for Food Support.

In 2010, a total of 1,552 households who called the Minnesota Food Help-Line learned that they might qualify for Food Support.

Sixty-two percent of the calls to the helpline in 2010 were from the 7 county metro area. Counties beyond the Twin Cities region that accounted for the highest volume of calls were St. Louis, Wright, and Stearns.



Number of calls made to the helpline in 2010 by geographical region



The helpline was really, really helpful. They sent me a packet and told me that everything I needed would be in there. . . That was the only thing I was really looking for – help with food, because it’s coming time for Christmas, and there’s no food in the house. I got fired from my job because my son has a heart condition and I had to stay home.

—mother of 3 calling from Hennepin County



AmeriCorps members answering calls to the Minnesota Food HelpLine

Facts from the helpline



In 2010, the Minnesota Food HelpLine received **3,691** calls and screened **1,767** households for Food Support benefits.



As a statewide resource, the helpline has spoken to callers from **80** out of the **87** counties in Minnesota.



In 2010, **88%** of households that were screened for benefits qualified for Food Support.

The Minnesota Food HelpLine makes a difference in the lives of callers like these every day.

Listen to these callers' stories. . .

Minnesota Food HelpLine helps single mom receive both immediate and longer term food help

Anna* didn't know where to turn for help. Her husband had just left her and she was faced with the reality of not being able to afford groceries after paying that month's bills. She had a 10 month old baby to take care of on her own now and wasn't sure where she could find the food help she needed.



The helpline staff person told Anna about a food shelf that was located in her town and encouraged her to call them right away to set up an appointment. Anna also learned that she likely qualified for Food Support and WIC.

In the ten minutes it took her to make a call to the Minnesota Food HelpLine, she was able to find somewhere she could get food help that day, learn about government food assistance, and have an application mailed directly to her.

Senior caller receives \$80 in Food Support, thanks to the Minnesota Food HelpLine



When Laura* saw an 'Eat Well to Be Well' poster in her apartment building, she decided that stretching her food budget was something she needed to look into. As a senior citizen living alone with a fixed income, Laura was having a hard time making ends meet—even with help from her local food shelf.

Laura talked to a few residents of her low-income housing unit, and they told her how they had called the Minnesota Food HelpLine and gotten help in applying for Food Support benefits.

When Laura was screened during her helpline call, she learned that she might qualify for Food Support. A few days later, she received a packet in the mail with an application and information about other programs for which she might be eligible.

Laura was able to have someone sit down with her and help her complete and turn in the application for Food Support, thanks to a referral from the helpline. She also learned that she had the option of doing the application interview over the phone, which simplifies the application process for those that have difficulty in getting to their county office.

Within a few weeks, Laura's application was approved and she received an EBT card in the mail. Her monthly \$80 Food Support benefits now help her to afford the healthy foods she needs and maintain her sense of independence.

* names have been changed