In November, congress voted to cut funding to the Women, Infants and Children program by $100 million beginning next year, potentially putting an end to the best and most well-structured welfare program our country has today.

The Women, Infants and Children program, commonly known as WIC, caters to expecting or nursing mothers, as well as children up to age 5. In the program, maximum monthly allowances are doled out to mothers and her children depending on the age of the children and whether or not the mother is breastfeeding. If your household income falls at or below 185 percent of the U.S. Poverty Income Guidelines, roughly $41,500 for a family of four, you are eligible.

But what makes the WIC program so effective is the level of control it holds over what kind of food and other products can be purchased with the aid. Only simple, healthy foods can be bought. Juice, milk, cereal, cheese, eggs, produce, whole wheat bread, canned fish, beans, peanut butter and in some cases, baby formula. That’s it. It’s healthy, nutritious food that provides basic nourishment the young child, as well as the mother.

“WIC not only provides the financial supplement focused on certain foods to assure children and moms are eating nutritious meals, but WIC also monitors the health and growth of children and pregnant moms involved in the program,” Oswego County Opportunities Executive Director Diane Cooper-Currier said.

So then why are hundreds of millions of dollars being taken away from the program? It surely isn’t because fewer people are taking advantage of the program because the program has been steadily growing since its inception in the late 1960s under President Lyndon Johnson. Today, roughly 9 million mothers and children participate in the program.
This may sound like a lot, but in the last year alone, over 200,000 people left the program. This drop is the first decrease in participation since 2000 and one of the few instances of it happening at all during the program’s history.

Why? Because like everything in society, the program is getting more expensive. In 2011, the cost per participant in the program was the highest in history; nearly $47 per month. This is an increase over the roughly $41 it took to cover the monthly food cost for one person a year ago, but for the price of a fancy steak dinner, a young child or nursing mother can have supplemental, vital nutrition needed for an entire month.

The jobs may leave, but the mothers and children will not. In Oswego County, the unemployment rate is 10.2 percent in December 2011—the second-highest unemployment rate in the state. It is far better than the 12.5 percent unemployment rate that plagued the county in January of last year, but it is still alarmingly high.

At a time like this, when more and more people are forced out of work with a family to support, the timing to cut back a program that provides food and nutrition to mothers, infants and young children just isn’t right.

So if the WIC program is reduced, or even cut, what alternatives are there?

The most popular option is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Commonly known as Food Stamps, the program provides aid for families to purchase food. As long as your household income falls below 130 of the federal poverty line, you may be eligible.

“Unlike the WIC program which serves a targeted population, food stamp benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure,” Addie Dolbear, Director of Assistance Programs for Oswego County Department of Social Services, said.
The similarities between the two programs end there. Rather than WIC, which outlines what foods can be purchased; food stamps allow nearly any food to be purchased. The only products that cannot be purchased on food stamps are: Alcohol or tobacco, food that will be eaten in the store, hot foods and non-food items—pet foods, soap, paper products, household supplies, vitamins and medicines.

While many can agree that a person should not be able to buy a case of beer with food stamps, the restrictions—or lack thereof—allow for the purchase of nutritionally-void foods such as caffeinated soft drinks, sugary candy and snack foods and other heavily processed foods.

What do Italian sports cars, a 24-pack of soda and food stamps have in common? They’re all needlessly expensive. While Lamborghinis are not eligible on food stamps, soda is. So are energy drinks and sugar-packed juice cocktails, punches, blends and anything else that isn’t 100 percent juice—the only kind of juice that can be purchased on WIC.

The prohibited list of products appears straightforward, but in reality, it has more holes than a block of Swiss cheese—which if it is imported, is not allowed on WIC.

When one walks into their neighborhood Price Chopper, the hot prepared food section is prominent, serving anything from pizza to roast chicken. If it’s hot and ready to eat at that moment, it is not eligible. But when you take that same pizza and slide it into a plastic bag and place it in the refrigerator, it is suddenly eligible. It is an absurdity that many supermarket employees find frustrating and asinine.

“I think that WIC is a solid program, but food stamps should be regulated,” Ashley Goodwin, an employee at the Oswego Price Chopper said. “I can’t afford to buy a 12-pack of Red Bull and shrimp every week but they (food stamp participants) can and it’s unfair.”
The steam from the hot pizza may cloud the bag, but as long as it isn’t ready to eat at that exact moment, it does not qualify as a hot food. The same goes for the chicken as well. Hot out of the oven, it’s off-limits. Put it in the refrigerator and it’s fair game. Same food, different temperature.

The idea to prohibit ready-to-eat is noble, but flawed. Most can agree that home-cooked meals made from fresh ingredients are healthier than ones from a box. It is for this reason why WIC is a much more effective program. It takes the decision out of the hands of the busy mother with three kids begging for macaroni and cheese, hot dogs and candy and places it in the hands of the program, who designed the selections to maximize nutrition for a cost that is reasonable for the taxpayers supporting the program.

SNAP isn’t cheap either. In December of last year, there were 3,068,575 food stamps recipients in New York alone—an increase of over 21,000 people from the previous month. (So much for there not being a need) These participants received $460,202,319 in aid, roughly $150 per recipient, per month. Compare this to the $46 it cost to feed a participant of WIC—a number that Congress voted was just too high.

This is not to say that food stamps do not benefit, because they certainly do, a point communication studies professor Dr. John Kares Smith points out:

“"The food stamp programs—local, state and federal—were devised to keep people from starving, especially pregnant women and children,” Smith said. “Poor people not only deserve a chance at social and material success, but they have every human right to have enough resources to not starve to death.”

Cooper-Currier echoes a similar sentiment:

“Like all of us, even the poor should have the right to choose what's put on their table. I pose the question as to how much should government regulate the basic rights of people—even when it comes to food.”
But what about the people that fall between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line? Mothers and young children that fell in that range could depend on WIC for much of the nutrition they needed. The $100 million has already been cut, but future cuts are more than likely. Many Republican politicians voted for even deeper cuts to the program, such as House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI), who authored the bill that would deal the potentially-fatal blow.

While many tote the fact that every dollar spent on food stamps generated $1.74 in economic activity, according to the Government Accountability Office, every dollar spent on WIC generated a whopping $2.89 in health care savings in the first year and $3.50 over 18 years.

“The benefits of the program are far reaching and although purchases aren't as regulated as WIC there still are a wide range of advantages to the program,” Dolbear added. “We also, however, have to remain realistic and know that we will never obtain 100% success with the nutritional choices of all food stamp recipients.”

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the bill would force WIC to turn away 325,000 to 475,000 eligible low-income women and young children next year. For some, food stamps could provide some relief. But for others who are not eligible for food stamps, they will have nowhere to turn.
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