

Food stamp use in commissaries rises nearly 40 percent

By Karen Jowers, *Army Times*

Food stamp redemption in commissaries shot up nearly 38 percent in fiscal 2010, continuing a trend of sharp increases over the last three years.

Since 2007, the dollar amount of food stamp redemptions in commissaries has nearly tripled — from \$24.9 million to \$73 million — while it doubled nationwide.

Defense officials and family advocates caution that it is unclear how many of those using food stamps in commissaries are active-duty families, and that the upward trend is not necessarily an indicator of inadequate pay.

The Agriculture Department food stamp program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is run by the states, and neither the department nor the commissaries track who uses food stamps. National Guard and reserve members, retirees and their families also shop at commissaries and also may be eligible for food stamps.

“If you can’t drill down to who’s using the food stamps, you just have to speculate,” said Joyce Raezer, chief operating officer of the National Military Family Association.

She said Guard and reserve members returning from mobilization may find their civilian jobs gone, or retirees may have trouble finding jobs after leaving service.

The likelihood, she said, is that it “comes back to the economy.” Pentagon and Agriculture Department officials are working on a new study of food stamp use in the military, Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez said.

The most recent study, in 2003, indicated that fewer than 2,100 service members were on food stamps in 2002, about one-tenth of 1 percent of the 1.4 million active-duty personnel.

The study concluded that overall military food stamp usage is not widespread, she said, and “was more a result of larger household sizes and living in government quarters than an indicator of inadequate military compensation.” Basic allowance for housing counts toward income eligibility requirements for food stamps for those who live off base, but housing on base is not counted.

Lainez noted that from 2002 to 2010, military pay rose 42 percent, housing allowances rose 83 percent and the military food allowance rose 40 percent.

In fiscal 2009, 245 active-duty members across all services, possibly including mobilized Guard and reserve members, received the Family Subsistence Supplemental

Allowance of up to \$500 a month. That allowance was created in 2001 to help service members, especially those with large families, stay off food stamps.

Who qualifies?

Food stamp eligibility depends on total family income and household size, among other things. A family of four with a total income of up to \$2,389 per month might qualify. An E-5 with six years of service earning \$2,584 a month in basic pay might qualify if he has four family members and lives in military housing.

Steeper increases at commissaries

While use of the government's Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program has nearly doubled nationwide since 2007 — from \$30.3 billion in redemptions to \$60 billion — use of SNAP at commissaries has almost tripled over the same period, from \$24.9 million to \$73 million. Percentage increases, year over year:

2008 — Commissaries: up 21%; Nationwide: up 14%

2009 — Commissaries: up 75%; Nationwide: up 46%

2010 — Commissaries: up 38%; Nationwide: up 19%

Sources: Defense Commissary Agency, Agriculture Department