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## The working poor are innocent victims of government shutdown

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**I**f the government shutdown continues, 650,000 Missourians will lose their SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) food benefits starting Nov. 1. That's terrifying.

I run one of the largest food pantries in St. Louis County — the Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry in Overland. If our elected officials fail to act, November will bring a crush of new clients. They'll want food, and we won't have enough. Not if the government fails to do its job and reopen.

The galling thing about this crisis is that SNAP aid isn't an issue in the shutdown fight. Our clients are innocent bystanders. Families won't have enough to eat. Children will go hungry.

This will happen because our elected representatives in Washington are too stubborn or too frightened to do their jobs and pass a budget.

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The SNAP program, formerly known as food stamps, provides an average of \$370 per household per month in grocery money. That's quite a bit to lose from a poor family's budget. But they still have to eat.

So, we expect big numbers at our pantry, and we'll have a terrible choice to make.

Choice one: Rationing. Right now, our clients can come every two weeks and fill a shopping basket with milk, eggs, meat, vegetables, fruits, cereal, and canned goods. We might have to cut the amount of food each family can take. That sounds mean because it is. But it will extend the time we can keep our pantry open.

There is also choice two: Prayer. We can let our bigger number of clients fill their baskets as they do now, praying that the government will fix this mess before our shelves are empty. At that point, the rationing will be severe.

It helps to understand how food pantries work. The Ritenour CoCare Food Pantry is a bare-bones operation, with two paid employees and 80 volunteers. We serve anyone in mid-St. Louis County with an income under 150% of the US poverty level. We serve the elderly and disabled, but most of our clients are working-poor families with kids.

For the first time in memory, we're serving families of federal workers. Without a paycheck, they qualify for help.

Most of our 9,000 registered clients don't come as often as we allow. Many come only when an emergency hits — the car breaks down or dad gets sick and misses work. Many participate in the SNAP program, and the end of food stamps will send them right to the pantry.

Much of our food comes from companies and supermarkets that generously donate surplus stock through food rescue programs. Food donations are coordinated by our partners at Operation Food Search and the St. Louis Area Food Bank, which supply pantries.

But there won't be more surplus food just because we have more clients.

We also buy food, using money from our generous donors. Sunset Hills Subaru has been a savior for us.

If you'd like to help feed people while the government is on hiatus, please make a financial or food donation to your local food pantry or food bank. We need all the help we can get.

You can also contact your members of Congress. Their job is to run the government. Please ask them to do it.

SNAP aid is not a bargaining chip. Children need to eat and cannot wait for the grown-ups to return to the table. Please, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our families, reopen the government and provide for our families in November and this Thanksgiving season.

Gabel is an attorney and director of the Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry in Overland.

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