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Lawmakers, advocates decry proposed cut

By PAUL DAVIS Journal Staff Writer

Rhode Island congressmen and local advocates say a House bill passed this week could strip food benefits from thousands of struggling Rhode Island individuals, families and veterans.

The House on Thursday voted to cut nearly \$4 billion a year from the almost \$80-billion-a-year food-stamp program, a 5-percent reduction to the nation's main feeding program used by more than 1 in 7 Americans.

In Rhode Island, enrollment in the program — now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — has been rising for six years, up from 73,000 people to 180,000. The average individual monthly benefit is about \$139.

"More than 47 million Americans depend on SNAP to feed their families nutritious meals, and nearly two-thirds of SNAP recipients are children, elderly or disabled," said U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin, who voted against the measure. "This bill takes a shameful step towards a Dickensian world, where the rich take care of themselves and the poor are left to fight for the scraps."

The measure, a win for conservatives, passed the House by a slim 217-to-210 margin. Democrats on Thursday opposed the bill.

The SNAP program "provides critical food and nutrition support for hard-working families in cities and towns across Rhode Island," said U.S. Rep. David N. Cicilline.

"That's why it is especially disturbing that tea party Republicans are now demanding such deep, painful cuts to nutrition assistance programs at a time when so many Americans are still looking for good-paying jobs," he said.

The bill would take away the ability of governors to waive SNAP's harsh time limit for people looking for work during high unemployment, Cicilline said. Also, it could cut school lunches for more than 200,000 children and eliminate food assistance for 170,000 veterans.

Two reports this week show Rhode Islanders are still struggling in the wake of the recent recession.

In August, the state's unemployment rate increased to 9.1 percent, from 8.9 percent in July, the state Department of Labor and Training said Thursday.

And new Census Bureau figures show more Rhode Islanders relied on food stamps, cash public assistance and Social Security's Supplemental Security Income last year than the year before.

According to Census data, nearly 20 percent of Rhode Island's children live in poverty. The poverty rate has been increasing steadily since the recession, said the child-advocacy group Rhode Island Kids Count.

The proposed reductions "are cuts to low-income children across the state that depend on the federal SNAP program for food assistance so they stay healthy," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Kids Count. "Thirty-eight percent of SNAP recipients in Rhode Island are children. If we want to achieve our educational goals, we need to ensure that children have the food and nutrition they need to thrive."

House conservatives, led by Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., say the SNAP program has become bloated.

In order to negotiate the bill with the Senate, Republicans said Thursday that one more step was needed. The House must hold a procedural vote to allow a farm bill and a food-stamp bill — traditionally lumped together — to go to a House-Senate conference together.

Once that happens, negotiations with the Senate can start.

It won't be easy. A Senate farm bill passed in June would make only a tenth of the cuts to food stamps, or \$400 million, and the White House has issued a veto threat against the House bill.

For years, Congress has combined farm programs with food stamps to garner urban votes for the rural proposals.