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Every four weeks, a Rhode Island town's economy booms as residents use food stamp money to stock up. But full shelves inevitably give way to days of want.



Hungering for a new month to begin

STORY BY ELI SASLOW

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON | IN WOONSOCKET, R.I.

THE ECONOMY of Woonsocket was about to stir to life. Delivery trucks were moving down river roads, and stores were extending their hours. The bus company was warning riders to anticipate “heavy traffic.” A community bank, soon to experience a surge in deposits, was rolling a message across its electronic marquee on the night of Feb. 28: “Happy shopping! Enjoy the 1st.”

In the heart of downtown, Miguel Pichardo, 53, watched three trucks jockey for position at the loading dock of his family-run International Meat Market. For most of the month, his business operated as a humble milk-and-eggs corner store, but now 3,000 pounds of product were scheduled for delivery in the next few hours.

Rebecka Ortiz, top, and Sariah, 3, of Woonsocket, R.I., unload food bought through SNAP, formerly known as food stamps.

He wiped the front counter and smoothed the edges of a sign posted near his register. “Yes! We take Food Stamps, SNAP, EBT!”

“Today, we fill the store up with everything,” he said. “Tomorrow, we sell it all.”

At precisely one second after midnight, on March 1, Woonsocket would experience its monthly financial windfall — nearly \$2 million from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. Federal money would be electronically transferred to the broke residents of a nearly bankrupt town, where it would flow first into grocery stores and then on to food companies, employees and banks, beginning the monthly cycle that has helped Woonsocket survive.

Three years into an economic recovery, this is the lasting scar of collapse: A federal program that began as a last resort for a few million hungry people has grown into an economic lifeline for entire towns. Spending on SNAP has doubled in the past four years and tripled in the past decade, surpassing \$78 billion last year. A record 47 million Americans receive the benefit — including 13,752 in Woonsocket, one-third of the town’s population, where the first of each month now reveals twin shortcomings of the U.S. economy:

So many people are forced to rely on government support.

The government is forced to support so many people.

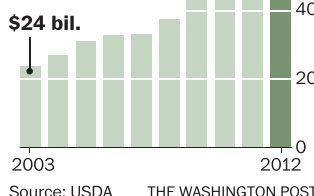
The 1st is always circled on the office calendar at International Meat Market, where customers refer to the day in the familiar slang of a holiday. It is Check Day. Milk Day. Pay Day. Mother’s Day.

“Uncle Sam Day,” Pichardo said now, late on Feb. 28, as he watched new merchandise roll off the trucks. Out came 40 cases of Ramen Noodles. Out came 230 pounds of ground beef and 180 gallons of orange juice.

SNAP enrollment in Rhode Island had been rising for six years, up from 73,000

SNAP’s growing cost

As the number of people receiving SNAP has grown to 47 million, the cost has more than tripled.



people to nearly 180,000, and now three-quarters of purchases at International Meat Market are paid for with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. Government money had in effect funded the truckloads of food at Pichardo’s dock ... and the three part-time employees he had hired to unload it ... and the walk-in freezer he had installed to store surplus product ... and the electric bills he paid to run that freezer, at nearly \$2,000 each month.

Pichardo’s profits from SNAP had also helped pay for International Meat Market itself, a 10-aisle store in a yellow building that he had bought and refurbished in 2010, when the rise in government spending persuaded him to expand out of a smaller market down the block.

The son of a grocer in the Dominican Republic, Pichardo had immigrated to the United States in the 1980s because he expected everyone to have money — “a country of customers,” he had thought. He settled in Rhode Island with his brother, and together they opened a series of small supermarkets. He framed his first three \$5s, his first three \$20s and his first three \$100s, the green bills lining a wall behind his register. But now he rarely dealt in cash, and he had built a plexiglass partition in front of the register to discourage his most desperate customers from coming after those framed bills when their EBT cards ran dry. The local unemployment rate was 12 percent. The shuttered textile mills along the river had become Section 8 housing. The median income had dropped by \$10,000 in the last decade.

Of the few jobs still available in Woonsocket, many were part-time positions at grocery stores like his, with hours clustered around the first of the month.

Pichardo catered his store to the unique shopping rhythms of Rhode Island, where so much about the food industry revolved around the 1st. Other states had passed legislation to distribute SNAP benefits more



International Meat Market's busiest day is the first of the month when customers on the SNAP program, formerly known as food stamps, come in to shop, so the store in Woonsocket, R.I., always stocks up in preparation. William Bobola, 75, above right, waits outside Bryan's Food Pantry. By the end of the month, many of the town's residents have run out of food.

gradually across the month, believing a one-day blitz was taxing for both retailers and customers. Maryland and Washington, D.C., had begun depositing benefits evenly across the first 10 days; Virginia had started doing it over four. But Rhode Island and seven other states had stuck to the old method — a retail flashpoint that sent shoppers scrambling to stores en masse.

Pichardo had placed a \$10,000 product order to satisfy his diverse customers, half of them white, a quarter Hispanic, 15 percent African American, plus a dozen immigrant populations drawn to Woonsocket by the promise of cheap housing. He had ordered 150 pounds of the tenderloin steak favored by the newly poor, still clinging to old habits; and 200 cases of chicken giz-

zards for the inter-generationally poor, savvy enough to spot a deal at less than \$2 a pound. He had bought pizza pockets for the working poor and plantains for the immigrant poor. He had stocked up on East African marinades, Spanish rice, Cuban snacks and Mexican fruit juice. The boxes piled up in the aisles and the whir of an electronic butcher's knife reverberated from the back of the store.

Late on the 28th, a boyfriend and girlfriend arrived at Pichardo's register with a small basket of food. "Finally! A customer," Pichardo said, turning away from a Dominican League baseball game streaming on his computer. The last day of the month was always his slowest. The 1st was always his best, when he sometimes made 25 per-



Jamella Holloway, top left, Amanda Aubin and Cody Allison, top right, and Jourie Ortiz, above, are some of the many Woonsocket residents who rely on SNAP money to buy food. The program supports 13,752 people in the town, one-third of its population, and 47 million people nationwide.

cent of his profits for the month. Pichardo rang up his last transaction of February: a gallon of milk, a box of pasta and a bag of discount cookies.

“That’s \$5.28,” he said.

The boyfriend handed over his EBT card: “Sorry. Running low,” he said. “I only got \$1.07 on there.”

The girlfriend handed over hers: “I got \$3.20 on this one.”

They paid the remainder of their balance with change, and Pichardo dropped it into his nearly empty register. Slow days reminded him of times when he had worked 14-hour days to avoid paying employees and once faced charges for selling stolen merchandise. But now, thanks to SNAP, he had scheduled four extra employees to work the next morning, when they would

hand out free eggs to big spenders.

Pichardo closed the register and totaled his sales for Feb. 28. He had made \$526.

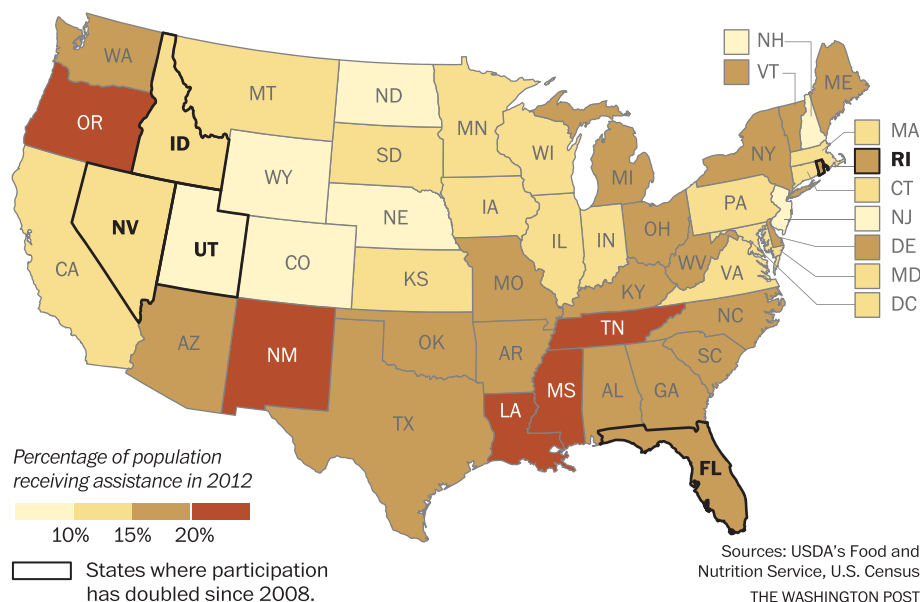
“Tomorrow, we do 15 times more,” he said.

THE LAST meal of the month was almost always their worst.

Rebecka and Jourie Ortiz usually ran out of milk first, after about three weeks. Next went juice, fresh produce, cereal, meat and eggs. By the 27th or 28th, Rebecka, 21, was often making a dish she referred to in front of the kids as “rice-a-roni,” even though she and Jourie called it “rice-a-whatever.” It was boiled noodles with canned vegetables and beans. “Enough salt and hot sauce can

State residents who receive SNAP

Rhode Island is one of five states in which the number of people getting SNAP assistance has more than doubled since 2008. In 2012, 16 percent of its residents received aid from the program.



make anything good," she said.

Late on Feb. 28, Rebecka came home to their two-bedroom apartment to make a snack for her daughters, ages 1 and 3. The kitchen was the biggest room in their apartment, with a stove that doubled as a heater and a floral wall hanging bought at the dollar store that read: "All things are possible if you believe!" She opened the refrigerator. Its top shelf had been duct-taped and its cracked bottom shelf had been covered with a towel. Only a few jars of jelly, iced tea, rotten vegetables and some string cheese remained in between.

For the past three years, the Ortizes' lives had unfolded in a series of exhausting, fractional decisions. Was it better to eat the string cheese now or to save it? To buy milk for \$3.80 nearby or for \$3.10 across town? Was it better to pay down the \$600 they owed the landlord, or the \$110 they owed for their cellphones, or the \$75 they owed the tattoo parlor, or the \$840 they owed the electric company?

They had been living together since Rebecka became pregnant during their senior year of high school, long enough to experience Woonsocket's version of recession and recovery. Jourie had lost his job at a pharmacy late in 2010 because of downsizing, and Rebecka had lost hers in fast food for the same reason a few months

later. They had filled out a one-page application for SNAP and been accepted on Oct. 11, 2011, awarded \$518 for a family of four, to be delivered on the first of every month. "Check Day!" they had begun calling it. They had applied for jobs until finally, late in 2012, they had both been hired for the only work high school graduates were finding in a low-wage recovery: part time at a nearby supermarket, the nicest one in the area, a two-story Stop & Shop across the Massachusetts line.

She made \$8 an hour, and he earned \$9. She worked days in produce, and he worked nights as a stocker. Their combined monthly income of \$1,700 was still near the poverty line, and they still qualified for SNAP.

Rebecka had read once that nobody starved to death in America, and she believed that was true. But she had also read that the average monthly SNAP benefit lasted a family 17 days, and she knew from personal experience the anxiety headaches that came at the end of every month, when their SNAP money had run out, their bank account was empty and she was left to ply Woonsocket's circuit of emergency church food pantries. St. Agatha's on Mondays. All Saints's on Tuesdays. St. Charles's on Thursdays, where the pantry opened at 10 a.m. but the line

of regulars began forming at 6.

To steady her nerves and improve her mood near the end of the month, Rebecka had started making elaborate grocery lists to prepare for the 1st — “an OCD habit,” she said. She sorted the items in order of importance and then rewrote the list again and again, until her handwriting looked perfect and the list became irrelevant, because she had memorized it all.

Now she reached into the refrigerator and grabbed two string cheeses for her daughters. Then she reached back for a third.

“Do you want a snack for work?” she asked Jourie, who was getting dressed for his midnight shift.

“Do we have enough?”

“I think so,” she said, handing him the cheese. “But I’m shopping tomorrow.”

“I’ll wait,” he said, handing it back. He stood up and hugged her goodbye. “They’ll fire me if I’m late,” he said.

He had neither a driver’s license nor a car, so he always walked the mile to work. He headed out of their apartment building in a hooded sweatshirt and turned down Privilege Street. His feet crunched against the snow, and his head steamed in the cold air. He passed a U-Save Liquors, a Cheap-O Tires and an Instant Payday Loans. He passed four stores with signs advertising that they accepted SNAP.

The government had designated Woonsocket a “highly distressed community” in 2012, and at night Jourie thought it also seemed deserted, a town that disappeared into twisting two-lane roads, shadowy mills and abandoned smokestacks. He watched his reflection in the empty store windows as he walked, crossing the border into Massachusetts and cutting through a parking lot toward the Stop & Shop. Its lights glowed neon. Four trucks idled at the loading docks, the sign of an economy coming alive for the 1st.

Jourie had almost never shopped at the store himself; it was too expensive. His family would spend Check Day somewhere else. He punched his timecard at 10:57 p.m. and walked into the store, where he stocked

the aisles with cat food as Feb. 28 ended and March 1 arrived.

THE FIRST five customers came to International Meat Market at 7 a.m., 30 minutes before the store opened. They leaned on shopping carts and smoked cigarettes, passing around a yellow flier that advertised the market’s bulk deals for the 1st. The flier detailed eight “Meat Packs.” Five pounds of deli cuts went for \$12.99; 28 pounds of beef for \$49.99; a 58-pound variety pack with pork, pig’s feet, chicken wings and London broil for \$99.99.

Pichardo unlocked the store and led the customers to the meat counter, where both the butcher and his apron were already smeared with blood.

“Lucky. You get first pick,” Pichardo told his customers, gesturing at the full meat counter. “Place your orders, and we’ll fill them as fast as we can.”

Every store had a gimmick for the 1st, and Pichardo’s was the meat packs, which accounted for most of his sales. The idea was to sell merchandise in bulk when customers were hungry and most likely to splurge, hours after the government had deposited an average benefit payment of \$265 onto their EBT cards. The nearby Shaw’s Market had started a dollar aisle, and the dollar store had 50-cent specials. Wal-Mart stayed open 24 hours, and customers sometimes waited out the final minutes of the month with full carts near the registers, counting down to midnight.

Grocery store chains had started discount spinoffs. Farmers markets had incentivized SNAP shopping by rewarding customers with \$2 extra for every \$5 of government money spent. Restaurants, long forbidden from accepting SNAP, had begun a major lobbying campaign in Washington, and now a handful of Subways in Rhode Island were accepting the benefit as part of a pilot program.

But SNAP recipients at International Meat Market were allowed to spend their money only on uncooked foods — nothing hot or pre-prepared, no paper products, pet

food, alcohol or cigarettes. A line formed at Pichardo's register, and he lifted one heavy cardboard box of meat after the next.

A part-time janitor came through with a meat pack, vegetable oil and canned tomatoes. "That's \$132.20," Pichardo said.

An unemployed welder with two meat packs and a 24-pack of Ramen. "One-hundred and-ten," Pichardo said.

A retired teacher. A single mother of three. A Salvadoran immigrant who wanted the meat pack flier translated into Spanish. A part-time employee at International Meat Market, hired for the day, buying \$69.99 worth of meat with a SNAP card during his 20-minute break.

"Thank you," Pichardo told one customer.

"Gracias," he told the next.

"Okay, my friend."

"See you next month."

By noon his shirt was drenched and his feet were swollen. His thumb and index finger were stained brown after grabbing and sliding 120 EBT cards in the past four hours. The store smelled like meat and sweat, and the aisles were a trail of discarded items. The exhausted butcher behind the meat counter had started mumbling under his breath in Spanish: "No mas. No mas. No mas."

Pichardo noticed none of it. His store had already sold more than \$5,000, with \$4,700 paid for in SNAP.

REBECKA WENT shopping early that afternoon. Jourie was still sleeping off his midnight shift, so she decided to take the girls by herself. She wanted to visit at least two stores to capitalize on the best deals. She packed snacks and diaper bags and loaded the girls into the car, a 2004 Mitsubishi Galant leased on 18 percent interest for \$90 a week. They drove across town to Price Rite, the cheapest chain in Woonsocket, and the town's epicenter of the SNAP economy.

Nearly 150 cars filled the lot, and stray shopping carts edged into the adjacent road. The sign in front of the store adver-

tised "Impossibly, Incredibly, Inconceivably Low Prices." A city bus had stopped at the entrance a few minutes earlier to drop off 30 shoppers before turning back to pick up 30 more. The residents of Woonsocket had petitioned for the route in 2011, but now buses suffered from overcrowding on the 1st and drivers enforced a limit of seven grocery bags per person on the way home. A line of opportunistic cab drivers had begun waiting outside Price Rite on the 1st, ready for customers with more than seven bags and with \$4.75 for the fare.

Rebecka moved quickly through the lot and lifted her 1-year-old, Jaeliece, and her 3-year-old, Sariah, into an empty shopping cart.

"Please keep your hands in the cart," she told them. "Only Mommy gets to do the shopping."

The first tantrum came before they reached the front door. Sariah wanted a balloon, and then a gum ball, and then a bag of oranges off a display near the entrance. That was the trouble with shopping on the 1st, after a week of skimping and rice-a-whatever: There were so many things to want, and stores designed themselves to maximize temptation. Juices were placed low within reach of the kids. Candy and Coke displays blocked the aisles. A six-foot-tall mountain of Oreos towered just inside the Price Rite entrance, a temporary display for the 1st that Sariah was reaching for now.

"No," Rebecka said. "That's not on the list."

"Mine," Sariah said, grabbing a bag of cookies.

"No."

"Mine!" Other customers turned to look. Rebecka still had two stores and 70 items left on her shopping list for the day.

"Fine," she said. "You can hold it." She moved past the cookies and hustled through the store, weaving between customers who were shopping with two carts and grabbing items by the cardboard crate. Little boys ran around retirees on their motorized scooters. Rebecka focused on the list and calculated prices in her head. She grabbed two boxes

of Cinnamon Toast Crunch (\$2.49), a four-gallon bottle of cooking oil (\$5.99) and three gallons of milk (\$3.10). She pushed the kids toward checkout, where long lines snaked behind all 12 registers. Sariah started throwing items out of their cart. Jaeliece began to cry. "Damn it," Rebecka said. She pushed her cart into an express lane for 10 items or less and set her 22 items on the conveyer belt. "I'm sorry," she told the cashier. Then she handed over her EBT card, paid \$49.20, and loaded the kids back into the car for Wal-Mart.

The crowds got bigger.

The prices got higher.

The tantrums got worse.

"Damn it!" Rebecka said again, racing around the store, oblivious to her own list, picking up anything that looked healthy or filling and dropping it into the cart. Sariah grabbed a box of Goldfish off the shelf and opened it. "I guess we have to buy that now," Rebecka said. Jaeliece opened a string cheese and threw it on the floor. "I guess we have to buy that, too," Rebecka said. Sariah ran away, and Rebecka ran after her. Sariah hid, and Rebecka searched for her in produce.

"I can't do this anymore," she said, after almost an hour in Wal-Mart. She pushed the kids toward the checkout line. Another SNAP shopper was already in front of her with \$230 worth of food on the conveyer belt, so they had to wait. Sariah grabbed a package of Play-Doh off the shelf and ripped it open, throwing green putty on the floor. "Are you serious?" Rebecka said.

"That's another \$6.50 you just cost me."

"I've been there," said the shopper in front of her, turning to help clean up the Play-Doh.

"I'm flipping," Rebecka said.

"The best and the worst day of the month," the shopper said.

Rebecka paid \$168 and returned to the parking lot. Sariah fell on the gravel and started to cry. "We'll stop at Burger King," Rebecka said, crying now, too, so tired she didn't care what lunch would cost. They went to the drive-through and continued home. She left the groceries in the car, and Jourie hauled them up to the apartment. They wedged the boxes into the fridge. "I couldn't get it all," she told Jourie, explaining that she had made it only halfway through her list. She had spent about two weeks of SNAP money on groceries that would last seven or eight days.

Later that night, as the kids went to bed and Jourie readied for another shift at work, Rebecka grabbed a calendar off the wall and turned the page to March. The 1st was almost over. Price Rite had closed. The buses had stopped running. Pichardo and his employees at International Meat Market had all gone home, after mopping meat from the aisles at the end of an \$8,200 day.

Rebecka touched each empty box on the calendar with her finger and counted out loud, plotting the long decline before the cycle of a SNAP economy began again.

"Thirty more days," she said.

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