

Reuters

Bologna sandwich is US Senate meal on 'hunger day'

By Charles Abbott

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WASHINGTON - In an ornate room of the U.S. Capitol, Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin offered for lunch a bologna sandwich, macaroni and cheese and a cup of sugary fruit punch -- value \$1 -- on Tuesday in hopes of getting \$3.7 billion in return.

"This is what poor people will have for lunch, and for dinner ... This is every day," Harkin told reporters beforehand.

The meal was intended as a first-hand demonstration that food stamp benefits, which average \$1 a meal, should be increased. As chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Harkin sponsors legislation to boost food stamps by \$3.7 billion over five years.

"It's pretty powerful," said North Dakota Sen. Kent Conrad of Harkin's presentation, made at the weekly closed-door luncheon of Democratic senators. A few senators opted for the food-stamp meal. The rest chose from salad, salmon, chicken and other entrees with a dessert table available. "No desserts," said Harkin, for senators who selected the food-stamp menu.

The setting was symbolic -- lunch was served in the Senate room named for President Lyndon Johnson, who made food stamps a permanent program -- and Tuesday was National Hunger Awareness Day, a day when antihunger groups call for attention to public nutrition programs.

Some 26 million Americans are enrolled in the food stamp program, which helps poor people buy food. Food stamps are the major U.S. antihunger program.

According to the Agriculture Department, which runs the program, 65 percent of eligible people participate in the program, an increase from 54 percent in 2001. "No one should go hungry," said Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns in a statement.

Besides the plan backed by Harkin and Indiana Republican Richard Lugar, there is a House bill to increase food stamp spending by \$5 billion. The Bush administration has proposed that college and retirement savings should not be counted when determining eligibility.

"We will work for as much as we can get," said Ellen Vollinger of the antihunger group Food Research and Action Center.

The Harkin-Lugar plan would change parts of the formula that determines the size of benefits given to applicants. They would allow recipients to have more than the current maximum of \$2,000 in liquid assets and to deduct the full cost of child care. Eligibility would be restored to some legal immigrants and benefits for unemployed, childless adults would go up.

"We are adjusting the standard deduction," said Harkin. "That means they will get more."

****C-SNAP's report 'Food Stamps as Medicine: A New Perspective on Children's Health' was passed out to all 51 senators at this lunch (thanks to Ellen Teller at FRAC).**