The ripple effect of hunger this holiday season and beyond

What if your family of four only had $6.60 to put a holiday meal on the table or you had to go without?
That is the reality for many Coloradans, since benefits for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, more commonly known as food stamps, were reduced for all households on Nov. 1. While many feast this holiday season, more than half a million Coloradans may worry about when and where they will get their next meal, as their SNAP benefits dwindled towards the end of each month.

The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009, which was designed to strengthen the economy and ease hardship, included a temporary boost to SNAP, offering additional support to families and individuals affected by the greatest depression since the 1930s. With its recent expiration, food hardship returns for many of our neighbors still facing struggles.

A family of four experienced a $36 monthly reduction in benefits to purchase groceries. While this may not seem substantial to you, every dollar matters to those trying to make ends meet. Such a reduction actually means 21 fewer meals per month, or only having $1.40 per meal, per person. With tighter budgets, it also may mean the inability to purchase fresh produce, having to choose between paying rent and heat instead of food, or turning to already-strained charitable and faith-based groups distributing emergency food.

What many may not realize is that hunger, though often invisible, affects everything. It impacts a person’s health and can be a culprit of obesity, so we don’t address the issue on the front end through programs like SNAP, we will foot medical expenses for preventable conditions in the future.

Hunger hinders education and productivity, not only stunting a child’s overall well-being and academic achievement, but swallowing an adult’s ability to be a focused, productive member of society. Even those who have never worried about buying food experience the ripple effect of hunger, which seeps into our communities and our state’s economy.

Yet, Congress continues to debate $40 billion in additional cuts to SNAP at a time when people are expected to be thankful for what they have, though they may not even have enough food to eat. Hunger relief historically has been a nonpartisan issue, but Rep. Scott Tipton and all other Colorado Republicans support the staggering cuts proposed in the Nutrition Reform and Work Opportunity Act of 2013, arguing that the current program is “handout to those in need.” This is not the case, since data shows that a majority of able-bodied SNAP recipients in Colorado do work, and those unable to work – 223,000 children, seniors and disabled – are the ones benefiting most from the safety-net program.

Such deep cuts not only would be harmful for those utilizing SNAP, but there would be a larger ripple effect felt across our state. SNAP helped create 73,085 jobs between 2008 and 2012, and it generated an estimated $3.4 billion in federal funding for Colorado retailers, including grocery stores and farmers markets, in the past five years. Further, every $1 increase in SNAP benefits generates about $1.70 in economic activity, boosting our state’s economic health. Simply put, SNAP makes dollars and sense for Colorado.

It’s a shame that so many of our neighbors may go without and face hunger this holiday season. Food – and nutritious food at that – should be a basic human right. Our Colorado delegates in Congress have the opportunity to protect SNAP, not slash it, and help ensure that we have a healthier, stronger state, where no Coloradan goes hungry at any time of the year.

Kathy Underhill is executive director for Hunger Free Colorado, the state’s leading anti-hunger advocacy organization.