

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Food Stamps Buy Unhealthy Drinks

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Food stamps have been a lifesaver for millions of families across the country. Supplementing family income, they are responsible for helping to keep many Americans working in low-wage jobs instead of ending up on the welfare rolls.

Unfortunately, people can use food stamps to buy bottled sugary drinks even though sodas are a major cause of overweight and obesity in this country. In New York City, 58 percent of adults – over three million people – are overweight or obese.

We cannot buy alcohol or cigarettes with food stamps because they have been proven to be detrimental to our health. But the federal government subsidizes the beverage industry by allowing food stamps to purchase bottled sodas, even though soda has no nutritional value.

Young people of color are at particular risk. The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention determined that “childhood obesity continues to be a leading public health concern that disproportionately affects low-income and minority children.” In New York City, nearly 40 percent of public school students (K-8) are obese or overweight.

In an attempt to cut down on this leading cause of obesity, New York City asked the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) – which operates the food stamp program – for a waiver to prevent the purchase of these bottled drinks with food stamps. New York was turned down. Maybe the U.S.D.A. didn’t want to make an exception for New York City. Or maybe beverage industry lobbyists are a bit too powerful in Washington to allow a waiver to be approved for the nation’s largest city.

One of the reasons why bottled sodas are popular in low-income neighborhoods is that they are less expensive than fruit juices or milk. Fifty years ago, Michael Harrington wrote about the type of food pushed on the poor in his classic, *The Other America*: “If these people are not starving, they are hungry, and sometimes fat with hunger, for that is what cheap foods do.”

Sugary drinks have been sold in ever-increasing bottle sizes. It costs the beverage companies pennies to go from 16 ounces to one liter to two liters, all the while their profits increase. Americans consume 200 to 300 more calories daily than 30 years ago. The largest single increase is due to sugary drinks.

Sugary drinks are a major factor in the cause of obesity and its collateral diseases and health problems, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. It’s not surprising that the city’s low-income neighborhoods, mostly communities of color, suffer from high incidences of these health problems. Latino New Yorkers are twice as likely as whites to die of diabetes.

There has been a campaign, financed by the beverage industry, against Mayor Bloomberg's recent proposal to ban sugary drinks larger than 16 ounces in certain venues. Its argument is that no one has the right to tell us what we can and cannot eat or drink. No doubt, these same protectors of our freedom would be up in arms if the U.S.D.A. banned food stamps from paying for bottled sodas.

As if the beverage industry stands for freedom. Both Coca-Cola and PepsiCo recently pulled their membership in the American Legislative Exchange Council, a right wing group that pushes voter suppression. They did so only after publicity leaked out about their financing voter suppression efforts in Florida.

Government restricts other products to benefit public health, such as asbestos, trans fats in food, and lead in paint. Instead of the U.S.D.A. allowing only New York City a waiver to prevent the purchase of bottled sodas with food stamps, it ought to ban their purchase nationwide. That would put some teeth into the department's messages about eating healthy.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.