

Food Stamps Subsidize Soda

Ever wonder why grocery stores and supermarkets charge sales tax on those two-liter bottles of soda but not on fruit juices or milk? It's because soda has no nutritional value. The same is true of candy, chewing gum, and bottled water – sales tax is charged on all these products. New York State has a long list of foods and beverages sold by food stores that are exempt from sales tax and those that aren't.

Yet people can use food stamps to buy those 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.

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. Nationally, more than one in four young adults (ages 17 to 24) is too overweight to serve in the military.

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.

Waiver Turned Down

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.

The Agriculture Department has a lot of information on its website about healthier school lunches, child nutrition, the nutritional value of foods, and its Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. There are many ideas put forth to promote healthy eating on the Food Stamp Program web page, but no mention of sodas. The U.S.D.A. doesn't make the connection between food stamps and unhealthy sugary drinks. Maybe it 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.

Linked to Health Problems

Sugary drinks have been shown to be 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. Black New Yorkers are almost three times more likely than 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 restaurants, sports venues, and movie theaters. The thrust of the industry's argument is that no one has the right to tell us what we can and cannot eat or drink. Not liberty loving Americans! 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 has a compelling argument for restricting purchases of sugary drinks. It 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, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

From the New York Amsterdam News
August 16 – August 22, 2012