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Springfield Stop & Shop the setting for Food Summit, offering tips for families struggling with rising grocery prices

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By **MANON L. MIRABELLI**

SPRINGFIELD - A corporate expert on grocery shopping, community group leaders and a camera crew from a national morning news program last week toured a local grocer in search of ways to make more affordable choices for anyone struggling to feed a family.

The Oct. 22 Food Summit held at the Boston Road Stop & Shop featured a panel of experts and state leaders who discussed the impact of rising food costs and ways in which families can shop efficiently and nutritiously.

Panel members included state Sen. Gale D. Candaras, D-Wilbraham; University of Massachusetts economist Michael Goodman; Andrew Morehouse of the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts Inc.; and Andrea Astrachan, Stop & Shop consumer advisor who discussed shopping strategies with an audience comprising local residents and representatives of community groups such as the Alliance to Develop Power.

Also present was a camera crew from the ABC morning news program "Good Morning America."

Panel participants addressed the important role that all community partners - private businesses as well as local, state and federal governments - play in preventing hunger.

"Programs like the Food Bank's Intergenerational Community Meals and Stop & Shop's Affordable Food Summit are critical to help families through the economic challenges facing our communities," Morehouse noted. "The Food Bank understands that people need food today, but that they also need skills and resources to build greater food security for tomorrow."

Candaras said the idea of a Food Summit at a grocery store was born of the town hall concept.

"We came to the place where the people we serve spend their time," Candaras said. "We've expanded the notion of the town hall meeting to include a place where the people are apt to be."

Some of those people included Carmen Duque and Lynn E. Bennett, both of the Powdermill Tenant Association in Westfield, who attended the Food Summit to garner valuable information they can take back to the 248 residents in the housing complex.

During a tour of the store conducted by Astrachan, Bennett, who inquired about the availability of gluten-free foods, said she learned that fresh produce can be frozen to extend its life.

"I learned to always check the unit pricing on packages of meat, too, instead of just the price marked," she said.

According to figures compiled by Stop & Shop, the average family of four spends about \$700 per month, or more than \$8,500 per year, on groceries, making it necessary for shoppers to learn how to navigate rising

prices without sacrificing quality, nutrient-packed meals.

One of the most effective ways to ensure that families have access to healthy and affordable foods is through the Food Stamps program, which provides supplemental cash assistance for food to families based on income.

"This program has proven increasingly necessary in light of evidence that working families do not earn enough money to meet household expenses," Morehouse said. "Two parents working full-time at minimum wage make \$33,280 a year. With two kids, this family will actually need \$54,182 just to cover basic needs."

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