

Trump administration food stamp cuts could impact nearly 200,000 Californians

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Food stamp changes potential impact on California

Hundreds of thousands of people receiving food stamps will no longer be eligible under a new rule finalized by the Trump administration on Wednesday.

CONCORD, Calif. - The Trump administration announced a new rule that could restrict food stamps for an estimated 688,000 Americans who receive aid through SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Program known in California as CalFresh.

Currently, adults eligible to work who are between 18-49 years-old with no dependents can receive food stamps for three months in a three-year period, if they don't meet the 20-hour work requirement. But states with high unemployment rates or a demonstrable lack of sufficient jobs can waive those time limits. The new rule imposes stricter criteria states must meet in order to issue waivers. Under the plan, states can only issue waivers if a city or county has an unemployment rate of 6% or higher. The waivers will be good for one year and will require the governor to support the request.

In a statement the U.S. Department of Agriculture said, "The Department is committed to providing SNAP benefits to those who truly need them, but it must also encourage participants to take proactive steps toward long-term self-sufficiency. In order to ensure these goals are met, the Department believes that waivers of the time limit should only be permitted when the circumstances clearly warrant that action and meet the statutory conditions for approval."

"We want to encourage people by giving them a helping hand, but not an infinitely giving hand," said Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue.

The rule change could have a big impact in California where the unemployment rate is low but the cost of living is high. Officials estimate nearly 200,000 Californians could be impacted. In California the food stamp program is known as CalFresh.

"Congress soundly rejected this plan on a bipartisan basis when it passed the Farm Bill less than a year ago. By taking this action, the administration is ignoring congressional intent in order to shred our social safety net system," said California Senator Dianne Feinstein.

"Make no mistake: this rule will not create jobs or help anyone find work – it's designed to punish unemployed or underemployed workers for falling on hard times and not being able to find a job," said Congresswoman Barbara Lee of Oakland.

In the Bay Area, Alameda County was already told in September, that thousands would be ineligible for extended food stamp aid, according to Anissa Basoco-Villarreal, policy director with Alameda County Social Services.

"In Alameda County, we actually lost our waiver in September of this year and so what we estimated previously was about 9,800 individuals," says Basoco-Villarreal, "For someone to say they shouldn't be receiving CalFresh doesn't make sense, because someone cannot afford to live especially here in the Bay Area."

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said the plan will only serve to punish workers whose jobs are seasonal or unreliable.

"This administration is out of touch with families who are struggling to make ends meet by working seasonal jobs or part time jobs with unreliable hours," said Stabenow, the top Democrat on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry.

Food banks worry the new restrictions could dramatically increase demand for food bank and strain supplies, because many clients who come for emergency food supplies are already barely getting by on food stamps.

In Concord, volunteers were working late into the evening preparing bags of fresh vegetables and stacks of supplies for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties.

"We do serve about 178,000 individuals per month," said Cassidie Bates, policy manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, "A lot of individuals are in a situation where they have to decide between paying the power bill or paying for groceries."

The Trump administration estimates the new rule will save about \$5.5 billion dollars over five years.

Bates says local food banks and other non-profit organizations, however, worry those costs will just be shifted onto their budgets and local communities' bottom lines.

"Currently we do not have the resources to make up the difference of all the SNAP cuts. We are largely funded by donors of our counties and that burden would really fall to our community to help make up the difference," said Bates.

Over the past year the Agriculture Department has proposed three significant changes to the food stamp program. In addition to restricting time limit waivers, the USDA has proposed eliminating broad-based categorical eligibility, a measure that allows recipients of certain non-cash public benefits to automatically qualify for food stamps, and changing how utility costs are factored into benefit calculations.

The Urban Institute in a study released last month estimated that taken together, the three measures would affect roughly 2.2 million households, and 3.7 million individual beneficiaries.

"Instead of combating food insecurity for millions, connecting workers to good-paying jobs or addressing income inequality, the administration is inflicting their draconian rule on millions of Americans across the nation who face the highest barriers to employment and economic stability," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said in a statement.

Brandon Lipps, deputy under-secretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Nutrition and Consumer Services, did not say when the department will finalize the other two proposed rules.

(AP content contributed by Juliet Linderman and Hope Yen.)

[LINK TO USDA STATEMENT](#)