
New SNAP Rule Would Cost Many of Nation's Poorest Their Food Aid

Statement by Robert Greenstein, President

Today, the Trump Administration issued a draconian rule in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) that will cut off basic food assistance for nearly 700,000 of the nation's poorest and most destitute people. Those affected — SNAP participants ages 18 through 49 who aren't raising minor children in their homes — are among the poorest of the poor, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. Their average income is just 18 percent of the poverty line. Their average monthly SNAP benefits are about \$165 per month.

A longstanding, harsh provision of SNAP limits these 18- through 49-year-olds to just *three months* of benefits, while not employed for at least 20 hours a week, out of every *three years*. Because of its severe nature, this provision of law also allows states to seek, and USDA to grant, *waivers* of this three-month cut-off for areas where insufficient jobs are available for these individuals, such as when unemployment is elevated.

From the provision's enactment in 1996 until now, both Democratic and Republican presidents alike have operated under a common set of criteria in granting waivers from the three-month cut-off. And Democratic and Republican governors alike have sought and secured these waivers. Thirty-six states currently have waivers for parts of their state where unemployment is highest.

Now, the Trump Administration is abandoning this longstanding, bipartisan practice, however, and replacing it with a much more restrictive rule that will increase hunger and destitution. The new rule sharply restricts states' ability to protect unemployed adults from the harsh time limit. It does so by substantially narrowing the criteria that states have most commonly used to qualify for waivers, thereby greatly shrinking the number of areas that can qualify for relief. As a result, the Trump Administration itself estimates that the rule will cut off basic food aid to nearly 700,000 unemployed or underemployed individuals.

Most of these individuals are *ineligible* for any other form of government financial assistance because they aren't elderly, severely disabled, or raising minor children. For many of them, SNAP is the only assistance they can receive to help make ends meet.

What's more, the final rule is more severe than the proposed rule, which itself was very harsh. States currently can request waivers when they experience rapidly rising unemployment, as typically occurs at the onset of economic downturns based on the Department of Labor's determination that

the state qualifies for extra federal unemployment benefits. But under the final rule, states must rely on *historical* data that would not reflect the onset of economic downturns until many months later. Moreover, far fewer areas will qualify for waivers during a widespread, national recession. A state with spiking unemployment reaching levels as high as 9 percent would not qualify for a waiver if national unemployment were also high, such as at 8 percent. This will limit a core strength of SNAP — its responsiveness to changes in economic conditions so that individuals who lose their source of income can quickly qualify for temporary food assistance. Instead of mitigating a recession’s harm, the new rule will exacerbate it.

Another Flawed “Work Requirement” Proposal

Adding to these concerns, although participation in a work or training program counts toward fulfilling the 20-hours-a-week requirement, states are *not* required to provide work or training slots to these individuals — and most states don’t. Furthermore, pounding the pavement and searching hard for a job does not count toward meeting the requirement. If you can’t find a 20-hour-a-week job on your own, you’re cut off SNAP anyway.

The Administration’s portrayal of the new rule as a reasonable “work requirement” thus is misleading — as noted, most states don’t offer any job, training opportunity, or slot in a work program to most people subject to the three-month limit. And people who are “playing by the rules” and looking hard for a job are cut off nonetheless.

In addition, the history of the three-month cut-off shows that some people who should qualify for an exemption from it because they suffer from a significant health condition often don’t get an exemption — and lose their SNAP benefits anyway, because they can’t satisfy the paperwork and other bureaucratic hurdles involved in securing an exemption. That’s especially troubling now, because the Administration is giving states little time to prepare for this sweeping change. Properly identifying which destitute individuals in formerly waived areas should be subject to the three-month time limit and which should be exempt (due to conditions that affect their ability to work) can require both training staff and allocating additional administrative resources.

Rule Hits People of Color, Those With Limited Education and in Rural Areas Hardest

Cutting off basic assistance doesn’t appear to help individuals get jobs, as research into the SNAP time limit, and similar rules in Medicaid, demonstrates. The rule will hit hardest those with the greatest difficulties in the labor market. That includes adults with no more than a high school education, whose unemployment rate is much higher than the overall unemployment rate; people living in rural areas where jobs are often harder to find; and people who are between jobs or whose employers have cut their hours to less than 20 hours a week, which is common in the very-low-wage labor market even when the economy is strong.

People of color are likely to lose benefits disproportionately under the rule, given their much higher unemployment rates and continued racial discrimination in labor markets. The African American unemployment rate has long been roughly double the non-Hispanic white unemployment rate. Studies have found that white job applicants are much likelier to receive callbacks after job applications or interviews than equally qualified Black applicants.

Here's how the new rule will harm these groups. Under the new rule, an area can qualify for a waiver only if its average unemployment rate over a recent 24-month period has been 20 percent higher than the national average for the same time period and was 6 percent or higher. But a local area with an overall 5.8 percent unemployment rate can have an African American unemployment rate closer to 10 percent, as well as an unemployment rate around 10 percent for people of all races who are age 25 or over who lack a high school diploma or GED.

The Administration and House Republican leaders sought, but failed, to secure these policy changes as part of the farm bill that Congress passed on a bipartisan basis last year. The Administration is now implementing through executive action what it failed to secure through legislation.

Instead of punishing those facing destitution and other difficult circumstances, the Administration should seek to assist them by pursuing policies such as more and better job training and employment programs, a higher minimum wage, and a strengthened Earned Income Tax Credit. Denying them basic food and nutrition is not the route that a fair and compassionate administration of either party should take.

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