

The Register-Guard

USDA tightens food stamp work requirements, worrying local nonprofits

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It's one of three proposed changes to SNAP by USDA; taken together the measures could ultimately affect around 2.2 million households and 3.7 million individual beneficiaries.

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is tightening work requirements for the federal food stamp program in a move that will slash benefits for hundreds of thousands of people.

The final rule, announced Wednesday, will limit the ability of states to exempt work-eligible adults from having to obtain steady employment in order to receive benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The program is commonly referred to as food stamps or the Oregon Trail Card and helps feed more than 36 million Americans, including 598,332 individuals and 352,000 households on Oregon's program as of June 2019.

Scaling back public benefits for low-income Americans has long been a Trump administration priority. The rule announced Wednesday is one of three proposals for cutting the food stamp program.

Under current rules, adults between the ages of 18 and 49 who are work-eligible, able-bodied and have no dependents can receive only three months of SNAP benefits in a three-year period if they don't meet the 20-hour work requirement.

States can waive this steady employment requirement if they have high unemployment rates or a demonstrable lack of sufficient jobs. However, the new rule imposes stricter criteria that states must meet in order to issue those

waivers, which will be good for one year and will require the governor to support the request.

The new plan will strip a state's ability to issue waivers unless a city or county has an unemployment rate of 6% or higher. Oregon's unemployment rate, reported in October, is 4.1%, and Lane County has an unemployment rate of 4.5%, as last reported by the federal office of Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2018.

Brandon Lipps, deputy under secretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Nutrition and Consumer Services, said tightening the work requirement would save roughly \$5.5 billion over five years. It also would cut benefits for roughly 688,000 SNAP recipients. The number of Oregonians affected was not yet available.

In 2018, Oregon allotted more than \$936 million in SNAP benefits, according to Oregon Department of Human Services data. Lane County allotted more than \$97 million, which was about \$8.12 million per month.

"Food assistance is a critical component to help our most vulnerable and address hunger, which disproportionately impacts rural Oregonians, low-income communities, and communities of color," said Charles Boyle, press secretary to Gov. Kate Brown. "Our office is still working with state agencies to analyze the impact of this rule on Oregonians, which is unfortunately just the latest in a string of unnecessarily punishing policies from the Trump administration aimed to push down hard-working people doing their best to get themselves on their feet."

One worry about the tightening of the work requirement is if the unemployment rate swings higher but remains beneath that 6% threshold, Oregon's options to help families would be limited.

"Unemployment is low now but the next time that changes and we're in a more difficult recession or economic picture, then Oregon will not have the flexibility to grant waivers as they've had in the past," said FOOD For Lane County Executive Director Tom Mulhern. "So it will make things worse for people who are affected by loss of jobs at that point."

The nonprofit is anticipating two main classes of people will be impacted most:

those seeking a job but who haven't yet found one and those who meet the SNAP definition of an able-bodied adult (meaning they are not receiving disability benefits), while in reality, aren't really able-bodied and are trying to receive disability.

Mulhern said he's seen many homeless people in Lane County who are not getting disability benefits, but "probably should be receiving disability benefits" because of reasons such as mental health. "But they've not been able to go through that process to be approved," he said.

This population has been eligible for SNAP to this point, but Mulhern said he anticipates they won't be going forward.

"It will reduce the availability of SNAP benefits for mentally ill persons who may be living on the streets," he forecast, "but they're not receiving disability benefits so they're considered able-bodied in the eyes of the program."

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue said the rule will help move people "from welfare to work."

"We want to encourage people by giving them a helping hand, but not an infinitely giving hand," he said.

Rep. Marcia Fudge, D-Ohio, called the rule "an unacceptable escalation of the administration's war on working families."

"The President has cynically weaponized USDA as a blunt political instrument, in clear opposition to its mission to 'do right and feed everyone,'" said Fudge, who chairs the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight and Department Operations.

The final rule will be published in the federal register Thursday and go into effect in April.

Over the past year USDA has proposed changes to other areas of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. USDA proposed eliminating broad-based categorical eligibility for food stamps, a measure that allows recipients of certain non-cash public benefits to automatically qualify for food

stamps.

When The Register-Guard reported on the possible change to broad-based categorical eligibility in September, Oregon's DHS estimated it would result in the loss of benefits for 66,000 individuals, or 34,990 households in the state, and data-driven policy group Mathematica provided numbers for the USDA that estimate 119,495 Oregon individuals, or 66,622 households, would lose their benefits.

In a third proposal announced in October, the administration proposed changing how utility costs are factored into benefit calculations.

Lipps said the USDA is currently reviewing comments received during public comment period for the other two proposals, but did not say when the department will finalize them.

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.

President Donald Trump supported House Republicans in their efforts to include stricter work requirements for food stamp recipients in last year's farm bill. Those provisions were ultimately stripped from the final bill.

"Any time that SNAP benefits tighten up or people lose SNAP benefits, those people tend to turn more to the emergency food pantry network that FOOD For Lane County supports," Mulhern said. "It just puts more pressure on that network. But we'll do what we always do — we're going to do the best we can to provide food to people who are struggling."

Register-Guard reporter Jordyn Brown contributed to this report.

