

Trump administration proposes cutting off food stamps for 3 million Americans

By Brian Dixon
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The Trump administration has proposed cutting off food stamps for 3.1 million Americans. The proposal will now be followed by a 60-day public comment period. The change will inevitably mean hunger for increasing numbers of Americans as they struggle to pay for other basic necessities such as housing, utilities, transportation and healthcare.

Agricultural Secretary Sonny Perdue proposed the rule changes on Tuesday, telling reporters in a phone call that it will “save money” and “preserves the integrity of the program.”

“The American people expect their government to be fair, efficient, and to have integrity,” said Perdue, who as governor of Georgia committed a number of ethically suspect actions, such as accepting \$25,000 in gifts and passing tax legislation allowing him defer \$100,000 in taxable gains from the sale of land.

The food stamp program, known formally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), generally limits benefits to individuals making less than 130 percent the poverty line, or about \$27,000 for a family of three, already an abysmally low figure.

However, for the past two decades states have had the option to use “broad-based categorical eligibility” to assist some families with incomes as high as 200 percent the poverty line, about \$43,000 for a family of three.

The option gives states the flexibility to allow beneficiaries to have modest savings in case of an emergency, purchase a new home, or take on extra work hours without the fear of losing their benefits.

“What the [current system] does is say to workers that if you want to work a few more hours, you don’t risk losing SNAP because you take the extra shift,” Stacy Dean, vice president for food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, told NPR.

“So it’s promoting work.”

Over 40 states and Washington D.C. have taken advantage of the option, which allows them to continue to provide food stamps to individuals who receive any form of means-tested welfare benefits (even something as simple as being provided a brochure on benefits) by raising the income and asset limits.

The proposed changes would restrict this option—which Perdue characterized as a “loophole”—by limiting it to only those individuals receiving substantial and ongoing assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a minimum of \$50 per month for at least six months. Individuals not receiving the necessary level of TANF aid would now have to separately apply for food stamps.

In the USDA’s impact analysis of the changes, it notes that 9 percent of SNAP households would no longer qualify, while 13 percent of SNAP households with elderly members would lose benefits.

The government agency acknowledges that the change will increase food insecurity and wipe out what little savings these low-income individuals may have at a time when increasing numbers of Americans face hunger and poverty.

“The proposed rule may also negatively impact food security and reduce the savings rates among those individuals who do not meet the income and resource eligibility requirements for SNAP or the substantial and ongoing requirements for expanded categorical eligibility,” the USDA stated in its impact analysis.

The cuts would also impact seniors and individuals with disabilities if their assets exceed \$3,500. Placing limits on the assets held by individuals discourages saving among the poor because their benefits may be cut off if they save up too much.

The program also allows 265,000 schoolchildren to

eat free lunches. The new proposal would require children to apply separately for these meals, but did not explain the process for doing so.

USDA officials partially justified the cuts by claiming the food stamp program is being abused. As supposed proof, Brandon Lipps, head of the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, cited a Minnesota millionaire and conservative activist, Robert Undersander, who applied for and received food stamps as a political stunt.

"As you know there's a millionaire who's come out to say he got on the program specifically to prove that he could. Americans won't support a program that allows SNAP benefits to go to people like millionaires," Lipps said Monday night. He made the preposterous statement that "there may be other millionaires" getting food stamps.

The number of individuals on food stamps has already been steadily dropping as states tightened their eligibility requirements. Around 36 million Americans use food stamps, a drop from 44 million in 2018 and 47 million in 2013.

Republicans attempted to make similar cuts in the negotiations over the 2018 farm bill. The current proposal is an effort to bypass the legislative branch by imposing the new rule.

Democrats attacked the proposal even though they have worked with Republicans to slash welfare and other benefits since the Clinton administration. Food stamps were also cut under the Obama White House.

"This proposal is yet another attempt by this administration to circumvent Congress and make harmful changes to nutrition assistance that have been repeatedly rejected on a bipartisan basis," responded Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan.

Ohio Democratic Representative Marcia Fudge called it "yet another attack on hungry Americans that ignores the clearly stated will of Congress."

Republicans and the Trump administration are framing the cuts, which would save a little over \$2 billion, as necessary to address the growing budget deficit.

Of course, no such concerns were raised when the Republicans passed \$1.3 trillion in tax cuts in 2017 or the record \$738 billion defense budget agreed to earlier this week by both Democrats and Republicans. However, when it comes to workers and their children

having enough food to eat, the answer is always that there is "no money."

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