

Thousands of Michigan students lose food stamp eligibility

Shannon Jones
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Tightened eligibility requirements for food stamps by the state of Michigan have resulted in 30,000 college students losing their benefits this year, double earlier estimates, according to a report published in the *Detroit News*. Nearly 2 million people in the state, one in five, are currently enrolled in the federal food assistance run by the US Department of Agriculture.

While federal rules do not allow most college students to collect food stamps, in 2000 Michigan created an exception for people enrolled in an employment and training program, including in college.

In recent years the state has cut funding for higher education while tuition has risen sharply. Combined with a more than 10 percent unemployment rate in Michigan the cuts have created severe financial hardship for students.

Average tuition and fees at Michigan public universities topped \$10,000 for the current academic year. This follows a 15 percent funding reduction this year to state public colleges and universities.

Starting October 1, assets will also be used in determining food stamp eligibility, further reducing the number who qualify. The cases of existing recipients will be reevaluated over a six-month period, with those found having assets over the maximum losing eligibility.

According to the most recent USDA data, 1,920,552 people are receiving food stamps in Michigan, up 6.6 percent from 2010.

Michigan Human Services Director Maura Corrigan portrayed efforts to cut students off food stamps as part of a drive to eliminate waste and abuse. In an interview with the *Detroit News* she said, “Maybe (students) could go get a part-time job—that’s what I did.” She continued, “We want to encourage people to be self sufficient, not to be dependent on the government.”

Kenneth, a graduate student at Wayne State University in Detroit, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the recently implemented rule changes to the Michigan food stamp program.

“I think it’s despicable, quite frankly. It won’t affect me personally, but there are some students here on campus that I know who will be affected by this. And it’s not just at Wayne State, but other schools in the metro area as well.

“I am working, but more and more students earn their degrees and can’t find work. I saw that quote by Maura Corrigan. I say to that, ‘I am sure these students would like part-time work if the work was there for them to get.’ Most college students are not lazy. They are here for a reason and they have some drive and initiative.

“The cuts have changed the atmosphere on campus, and not for the better. Some students are raising families of their own. Let’s face it, this is an urban commuter campus.”

Judy Putnam, communications director for the Michigan League for Human Services, told the WSW, “We think that as a state we should be making it easier, not harder, to go to college and get a degree. It is important not just for those individual students but our future economy.

“This is undoubtedly going to make it harder for some students.

“It is hard to know if we are clamping down too much and shutting out low-income students and parents. You don’t know have to have a degree in sociology to know how hard it is to juggle work, school and a family.”

The more restrictive requirements for food stamp eligibility come as the state of Michigan prepares to implement a four-year cap on welfare benefits. Both houses of the Republican-controlled state legislature

recently approved the four-year limit and the bill is in the process of final reconciliation. In 2007 the legislature approved a four-year limit that only applied to those eligible to work in the Work First employment program. The new cap will apply to all welfare recipients.

“It seems like there has not been much thought given as to what will happen with these families,” Putnam said. “They haven’t been informed who they are. It seems like the wrong time to pass this legislation. You are talking about families with children, among our most vulnerable people in the entire state at a time when we still have double-digit unemployment. We’re cutting these families off and throwing them to the wolves.”

The new law would leave Michigan as one of the states with the smallest cash welfare benefit. The Michigan League for Human Services estimates that 12,601 families in the state will lose welfare benefits when the new law takes effect October 1.

Nationally food stamp use is at an all-time high, with all 50 states reporting higher participation compared to 2010. According to the US Department of Agriculture 45.8 million people collected food stamps in May, an increase of 1.1 million since April and an increase of 12.1 percent from one year ago and 34 percent from May of 2009. A large part of the increase came from Alabama, the scene of recent devastating tornadoes. Currently 1.7 million residents in the state, one-third of its population, are receiving food stamps, up 118 percent from May 2010.

Compared to 2010, more than 20 states have seen a more than 10 percent increase in those applying for food stamps. New Jersey and North Carolina both saw a more than 20 percent rise. Nevada, Delaware, Minnesota and Maryland all saw rises of more than 18 percent.

The state of Texas currently has the most people receiving food stamps, 3.93 million. Texas is followed by California, with 3.68 million, and Florida, 3.06 million.

One in seven people in the United States are currently receiving food stamp benefits, with the average household getting by on a meager \$289 a month. Three quarters of these households have children. For the majority of households receiving assistance, food stamps represent the bulk of the money spent on food.



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