

Food stamps to be cut for 1.8 million people in Pennsylvania

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1.8 million in people in Pennsylvania will have their food stamp benefits cut in November when cuts made by the Obama administration and Congress take effect. Another 112,215 families have been completely denied benefits since an asset test was implemented in May 2012.

In 2012, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett instituted an asset test for people to receive food stamps. Under the plan a family is not allowed to have more than \$5,500 in total assets in order to qualify. A house, retirement plans and one car are not counted, but any savings and other assets are, including 401ks, personal items such as TVs, computers and jewelry and a second car. For persons over 60 the cut-off point is \$9,000.

In the first year, over 111,215 families were denied benefits—4,000 because their assets exceeded this ridiculously low amount, but the other 107,000 families because they couldn't provide the proper paperwork to substantiate their wealth.

The assets requirement has also added a massive amount of work to already overburdened case and social workers who assist those in need.

The November cuts are part of a \$5 billion national reduction in food stamps carried out by the Obama administration and Congress. Pennsylvania's program will be cut by \$183 million.

There are 1.8 million people receiving food stamps in Pennsylvania—over 14 percent of the population. Nearly half are children. Nationally 47 million people, including 22 million children, receive benefits from the program officially called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

Jessi Pistella, a social worker who does early intervention for young children at risk, said, "I don't

know how the families will cope once the food stamps are cut. People are going to be struggling even more. Already many of the food banks run out of food. They don't have enough food for the people they serve now."

For a family of three the cuts will amount to \$29.00 a month, which translates into 16 meals. According to a study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the US Department of Agriculture determines this to be what a family can buy as a "bare-bones diet." That amounts to \$1.40 a meal or \$4.20 per day per person for three meals. For a family of four the cut is \$36 per month, or 21 meals per month.

Of course, no family can live on that horrendously low amount and most families find that food stamps run out after two or three weeks. In addition, food stamps don't cover basics such as toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, vitamins and other essentials. Even hot food such as a pre-cooked chicken cannot be purchased with food stamps.

"We have families that can't afford house bills and medicines for themselves and their children," said Jessi.

"There are jobs out there but the pay is so low that you can't support yourself or a family," she added. "I have a 4-year degree and I have a low paying job."

Jessi explained that she works for an agency which contracts to Allegheny County to provide services. Rather than pay decent wages and benefits, the agencies make huge profits while the employees in many cases get poverty wages.

Regina works as a home health aide. "I think it stinks. People aren't making enough now to feed themselves, why should they be cutting food stamps? The economy is so bad we can't get anything decent. Most jobs are low paying, you don't get 40 hours and what benefits

you do get you have to pay for.

“I work with mentally challenged people; I do it because I want to help, but as far as paying any bills and having a little left over to live on, I can’t afford it. If I didn’t have a partner I don’t know where I would be.

“There are a lot of people out here struggling and food stamps only gives very little. You can’t buy food to last a month.” Pointing to the Bargain Dollar food store where she was shopping, she said, “I don’t know where you could buy food cheaper but it still doesn’t last a whole month. You can’t feed yourself off what they give you.

“Some of the areas where the politicians are cutting the budget are really affecting the people. Just look at what they are cutting—youth programs, programs for the elderly, these are the programs that people need. People who get food stamps still have to go to food banks. People I know are working second jobs just to make ends meet.”



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