

Food stamp cuts hit Wisconsin poor

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Many of Wisconsin's most vulnerable residents are facing painful cuts to food assistance benefits. As part of the bipartisan federal cuts to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)—known as FoodShare in Wisconsin—the elderly and disabled are seeing their monthly aid sharply reduced, according to the state's Department of Health and Human Services. The number of people receiving less than \$20 a month has doubled over the last year.

Nationally, the Democratic and Republican parties have joined in cutting food aid by billions twice in the last two years. In 2013, benefits across the country were reduced for the first time, as temporary increases included in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act were allowed to expire following a month-long shutdown of the federal government.

At the beginning of 2014, a further \$8.7 billion over ten years was slashed from the SNAP program, underscoring the ruthlessness of the ruling class and its political representatives in both big-business parties, who claim there is “no money” for vital social programs.

The cuts to food aid occur under conditions in which children, the disabled, the elderly, and even many working people confront desperate poverty and hunger. One in five children in the US does not have enough to eat, and 49 million people were considered food insecure as of 2012.

The most recent cuts to FoodShare benefits in Wisconsin are a consequence of the elimination of the “Heat and Eat” program, which provided residents who required heating assistance additional food aid. This program was cynically portrayed by Congressional Republicans as a “loophole” and eliminated with the connivance of the Democratic Party.

The FoodShare cuts have affected over 255,000 people, with an average reduction in benefits of \$90. This amounts to over \$276 million in cuts statewide

over the course of a single year.

Sherry Davis, a 56-year-old disabled woman, now receives just \$16 a month in food benefits as a result of the cuts. She told the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, “I was like, ‘Are you being serious?’ I can't buy food for \$16 a month.”

In addition to the cuts, the imposition of new eligibility requirements will disqualify many from FoodShare, with over 14,000 estimated to lose their benefits beginning April 1 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's most populous city and an area that has been ravaged by decades of deindustrialization. According to the Hunger Task Force, an anti-hunger advocacy group, over 28,000 FoodShare participants statewide will be disqualified from the program this year, with over 37,000 to be excluded the following year.

The stricter eligibility rules follow federal eligibility requirements, which have not been in effect in Wisconsin since 2002. According to the Food and Nutrition Service, federal eligibility “limits the receipt of SNAP benefits to three months in a three-year period for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who are not working, participating in, and complying with the requirements of a work program for 20 hours or more each week, or a workfare program.” In other words, one must work, participate in some form of job training, or a combination of both for 80 hours a month, or face having their SNAP benefits cut to just three months per three years.

States may waive these requirements if their unemployment rate is above 10 percent or if there is an insufficient number of jobs. In 2013, Republican Governor Scott Walker eliminated the waiver beginning for this year. The unemployment rate of Wisconsin in 2013 hovered around 6.4 to 6.9 percent.

However, the official unemployment rate fails to take into the account those who have dropped out of the labor force—an unprecedented number since the 2008

crash—and the kinds of jobs people are working. As the National Employment Law Project stated last April, “Deep into the recovery, job growth is still heavily concentrated in lower-wage industries.”

There is sharp discrepancy between the unemployment rate in Wisconsin and participation in FoodShare benefits. In January of 2010, when Wisconsin’s unemployment rate peaked at 9.2 percent, 10 percent of Wisconsin’s population received FoodShare benefits. In December of 2014, the unemployment rate in Wisconsin was 5.2 percent, yet 14.4 percent of Wisconsin’s population received FoodShare benefits.

The cuts to aid will be particularly difficult for areas such as Milwaukee County, which faces the worst poverty in all of Wisconsin. According to a recent report by the Hunger Task Force, 21 percent of Milwaukee County’s adult population (excluding seniors) lives in poverty, with 32.5 percent of its child population living in poverty.

Milwaukee County contains the highest number of FoodShare participants in the state. In 2014, a monthly average of 286,917 people participated in the program, almost doubling its rate from 2008.

Hunger Task Force has reported that previous food stamp employment programs have been grossly ineffective. They cite an example in 2011, when 6,021 people participated in a work program and *only 179* were able to find work.

Moreover, 39 percent of adult FoodShare participants are currently employed statewide, but, due to having low wages, they qualify for FoodShare benefits. Anti-hunger advocates warn that food banks and public charities in Milwaukee County will have to shoulder the increased demand for food even though they are already at capacity.

Sherry Tussler, executive director of the Hunger Task Force, denounced the cuts: “The FoodShare changes will ensure more people go hungry...What kind of town do we live in that has turned grown men into beggars? What kind of state do we live in that intentionally creates beggars?”

The change in Wisconsin’s SNAP eligibility is part of a national trend. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, most states waived the federal eligibility requirements following the 2007-2008 economic downturn. However, with official

unemployment decreasing, many states are moving to reinstate the federal requirements. While over 40 states have waivers, most will expire after the 2015 fiscal year. The CBPP has estimated that 1 million people across the US will lose their SNAP benefits in 2016.

The federal eligibility requirements were signed into law under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 by Democratic President Bill Clinton. It ended Welfare as an “entitlement” program, eliminating guaranteed access to benefits. Moreover, it placed a five-year maximum on benefits for pregnant women and families with one or more dependents. The act forever changed the American welfare system and its repercussions are still being felt today.

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