

More low-income Michigan workers set to lose food assistance

Debra Watson
3 January 2018

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) officials recently announced that they will cut off up to another 16,000 recipients from federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits over the next few months beginning January 2018. The number cut off food assistance will likely rise sharply later in the year as more populous areas of the state where poverty is concentrated, like Detroit, face cuts.

The cuts in the program, commonly called food stamps, will take place even though the official poverty rate of 16.3 percent is the same now as in the years following the onset of the Great Recession ten years ago.

Recipients will be disqualified from the SNAP benefits after three months if they have not found a minimum of 20 hours a week paid work. Penalties will apply to recipients between the ages of 18 and 50. Unless the individuals have children under 18, have been certified as disabled, are participating in work training, or are employed for 20 hours in some sort of volunteer or workfare job they will be cut off completely from any food assistance.

Individuals are also exempted from work requirements if they are actually collecting unemployment compensation benefits from the state. But in recent years the number of unemployed eligible for jobless benefits has declined.

The new restrictions will lead to cuts for the poorest in the state by the end of 2018. In general, SNAP benefits were previously available to all those with a household income at or below 130 percent of official poverty, currently about \$12,000 for an individual or about \$20,000 for a family of three. The average food stamp benefit for an entire month is only a meager \$125, or about \$1.40 per person per meal.

When the recession of 2001 increased unemployment in the US, Michigan and other states requested special waivers of work requirements to deflect social anger. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) estimates half a million people have lost food assistance across the US since 2016 as state waivers from SNAP were phased out or eliminated as unemployment fell below the trigger rate of five percent in the various states. The Trump administration wants restrictions imposed nationwide and waivers only available when unemployment rises above ten percent.

The new policy will impact some Michigan communities where one-third to one-half of residents are officially classified as poor. For example, the city of Kalamazoo has an official poverty rate of 32 percent, up from about 25 percent in the early 2000s.

Kent, Oakland, Ottawa and Washtenaw counties were affected already in the first phase of Michigan's SNAP rollback, imposed in January 2017. MDHHS officials say all Michigan counties will be under work requirement strictures by fall 2018.

Detroit, with a population of about 670,000, is already reeling from decades of economic decline and is the poorest large city in the US. The city's current official unemployment rate is just under ten percent. MDHHS indicates SNAP cut-offs will go into effect there anyway later this year.

Of all the US states, 33 of them including Michigan, until the end of 2018 have waivers in place in some or all of the state according to the US Department of Agriculture, which administers the SNAP program. A few states and US territories still have waivers with no work requirements statewide, maintaining food stamps as an entitlement, as does Washington, D.C.

Puerto Rico is already facing a crisis because the state

is block granted, that is, the entitlement to food aid is limited by a cap on total assistance. Before the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria forty percent of Puerto Ricans were so poor they qualified for assistance, but the capped federal amount is not expected to cover post-hurricane needs.

The official Trump budget proposes cutting one-fourth of the money spent for food assistance across the US. States would become responsible for a quarter of the cost of the program. Budget proposals being put forward by House Republicans are similar.

The attack on SNAP recipients is part of plans for deep cuts in entitlement programs at the federal level. The reductions are being justified by the huge budget deficits being created by the handouts to the wealthy contained in the recent Republican-sponsored tax cut legislation.

Families at the bottom end of the income scale are worse off by many measures since Bill Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and since strict work requirements were imposed on cash welfare recipients. In Michigan this happened on a massive scale more than five years ago. As part of the so-called welfare reform was a five-year limit on receipt of cash benefits imposed on mothers with children.

The five-year limit was the mechanism used coming out of federal welfare reform to end cash welfare assistance as an entitlement. Now the restrictions Clinton imposed on food assistance are being activated by states to gut SNAP.

As wages plummet and part-time jobs proliferate, US employers are exploiting a reserve of unemployed and underemployed workers to keep wages low. Indeed, welfare reform itself was intended as a whip to be used in the drive to push wages even lower.

Nick Lyon, current head of MDHHS, touted the SNAP cuts as an opportunity for the state to help people become self-sufficient. With absurd claims that the economy is booming, from Washington to Lansing, the capital of Michigan, politicians of all stripes are involved in covering up the extent of suffering among the most vulnerable of the population.

Significantly, Lyon is one of five state officials currently facing charges for the Legionnaires disease cover-up that led to the deaths of at least 12 Flint residents since the start of the Flint water crisis. During

recent court testimony, Professor Paul Kilgore from Wayne State University concurred with the earlier testimony of Dr. Marcus Zervos concerning a meeting they had with Lyon in 2016. Referring to Lyon, Kilgore said: "It was told to me that, 'We can't save everyone, everyone has to die of something' ... or something similar to that."

Time limits have sent cash welfare cases plummeting at the same time food aid is being cut. The biggest drop came when the PRWORA's restrictive five-year limit that had also been waived in many states including Michigan was strictly imposed on families with children living at home. According to the state of Michigan's own reports, annual cash welfare cases dropped from 70,000 families in July 2001 to only 19,000 by October of this year. The biggest cuts came with the imposition of a strict 48-month lifetime limit in 2011.

Meanwhile, SNAP assistance is being cut even as more and more people are dependent on the program. SNAP enrollment has surged over the past 15 years, despite certain categories of college students, elderly and unemployed being disqualified from the state's rolls during that time period. In July 2002 there were 331,000 families and 760,000 persons receiving food stamps in Michigan, according to MDHHS records. By October of 2017 there were 703,000 families and 1.3 million recipients receiving food assistance in the state, or about one in seven people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact