

US shutdown could leave millions without food stamps

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As the US government shutdown continues, millions of Americans face the prospect of being cut off from food stamps. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, provides benefits that allow some of the nation's poorest households to buy food.

More than 19 million households, or about 39 million people in the US, currently receive food stamps. The average monthly benefit is \$245. Now even this minimal aid stands to be withdrawn—partially in February and completely in March—if the government shutdown drags on.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has furloughed approximately 95 percent of employees in Food and Nutrition Services, the office that oversees the SNAP program. So as USDA workers go without pay, food stamp recipients' benefits may also be slashed.

Come February, the SNAP program faces a \$1.8 billion shortfall. If this were spread out evenly across the 19 million households that receive SNAP benefits, each would see a cut of about \$90 per month, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP).

If the shutdown that began December 22 stretches into March, current SNAP recipients would receive no money. Even if the Trump and administration and Congress come to an agreement to end the shutdown by February, households could experience a substantial delay in receiving their benefits due to operational and bureaucratic challenges at the USDA.

The average monthly SNAP benefit—which could easily be spent by any one of the millionaires in the White House or Congress for a single meal at an upscale restaurant—can mean the difference for food stamp recipients between going hungry or just getting by. Many of these households now face the threat of taking a further hit to their budgets, forcing families to

choose between food and making payments for rent, utilities, health care or other basic necessities.

Small businesses would also feel the pinch. According to an April 2018 CBPP report, in fiscal year 2017, SNAP recipients redeemed about \$63 billion in benefits at about 260,000 retailers. About 80 percent of these retailers were considered small businesses, including local convenience stores and small independent grocers. Those businesses serving low-income neighborhoods would be particularly hard hit.

As one of the last remaining vestiges of the safety net for workers and the poor, the food stamp program has come under bipartisan attack over the last decade. In 2014, President Obama signed legislation that cut \$8.7 billion in food stamp benefits over the next decade, causing 850,000 households to lose an average of \$90 a month. The Obama administration considered this to be an acceptable compromise with House Republicans' demands to slash between \$20.5 billion and \$39 billion from the program.

The Trump administration sought but failed to pass far-reaching changes to the SNAP program in the farm bill passed in December. House Republicans' version of the bill could have forced states to impose work requirements on SNAP beneficiaries ages 49 to 59. Those proposals would have resulted in benefit cuts for up to 1.1 million households, according to an estimate by Mathematica Policy Research.

Trump's proposals also targeted SNAP participants ages 18-49 who are not raising minor children in their homes. The average income of this group of food stamp recipients is just 33 percent of the poverty line, placing them among the poorest of the poor. Trump proposed scrapping work requirement waivers for this age group of SNAP recipients.

Under a particularly harsh, longstanding provision of

SNAP law, 18- to 49-year-olds without children are limited to receiving just *three months of benefits out of every three years* for those months in which they are not employed at least 20 hours a week. While participation in a training program counts toward fulfilling this requirement, states are not required to provide work training to these individuals—and most don't.

Due to the extremely harsh nature of this rule, beginning in 1996 SNAP law also included a provision that lets states seek waivers from the USDA from this three-month cutoff in areas where unemployment is high. Trump's proposal would have eliminated the most commonly used waivers, further punishing those individuals who cannot find work or job training by cutting off their food benefits.

Having failed to pass these draconian changes, the Trump administration is now seeking to implement them through executive action.



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