

“It’s going to be a bureaucratic nightmare”

Ohio foodbanks and charities struggle to prepare for Trump food stamp cuts

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The Trump administration’s new rule aimed at depriving several hundred thousand Americans of necessary food stamp benefits will go into effect in just two months. The rule severely limits states’ ability to provide waivers exempting those designated as “Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents” (ABAWD) from work requirements that limit their access to necessary Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. By the US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) own estimates, this restriction would cause 700,000 adults to lose their benefits, affecting about 7 percent of SNAP recipients nationally.

Beginning in April, only states with an unemployment rate 20 percent above the national average will be allowed to waive work requirements. The new law also blocks states from defining boundaries of economically distressed areas, instead relying on labor market areas that are defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This will make it more difficult for people living in cities that are surrounded by wealthier counties to receive waivers.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, the executive director for the Ohio Association of Foodbanks (OAF), spoke to the WSWs about the effect that the new rule will have on Ohio residents.

The OAF is Ohio’s largest charitable organization seeking to meet the needs of those in hunger. It represents 12 non-profit “Feeding America” foodbanks as well as a 3,600-member charity program that oversees food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters.

Asked how Ohio foodbanks are planning to prepare for the anticipated rise in foodbank use, Hamler-Fugitt noted, “SNAP is the first-line protection against hunger. SNAP provides 9 meals for every 1 that food banks can. We will have to do what we can by raising money and raising awareness to try to feed everyone. We will give away all the food we can, we will stretch and ration, but if we run out, the doors will close.”

Cynically citing the cuts as a gesture of respect to hard-working taxpayers as well as claiming that a booming

economy negates the need for federal assistance, the Trump administration presents a highly questionable picture of American life. In reality, as is the case in Ohio, the residents of working-class areas that continue to be wracked by poverty, under-employment and food insecurity will bear the brunt of the assault. Record corporate profits, a booming stock market and a low unemployment rate have done nothing to significantly improve the living standards of millions of Americans.

“By and large, the acronym ABAWD is a complete misnomer. This is a population largely living with undiagnosed mental and physical disabilities, and low literacy levels. Many have few family supports or are full-time caregivers for adult relatives,” Hamler-Fugitt explained.

“And those who can work, do work,” she added. “But many are forced to join the low-wage, temporary and contingent work force. Their employment rarely lasts longer than 79 days and they never get more than 30 hours per week. This means they won’t be eligible for unemployment in Ohio, but they also don’t make enough to support themselves.”

As Hamler-Fugitt describes, while jobs have been added to the American economy, these have tended to be lower-paying, hourly and temporary positions without benefits in the so-called gig economy. As a result, many Ohio residents eligible for SNAP and/or suffering from food insecurity are working, but still cannot support their families. New data released by the US Department of Labor shows that half of the 10 most common jobs in Cleveland pay workers too little to support a family of three without SNAP benefits, with annual incomes of roughly \$20,000.

Only 13 of the 42 Ohio counties currently exempt from work requirements will maintain their waivers. However, the 29 counties to lose waivers still suffer from high poverty levels. According to the February 2019 Ohio Poverty Report, released by the US Census Bureau, Ohio has poverty

rates higher than the national average of 13.4 percent, with an estimated 14 percent of the population living in poverty. The counties along Ohio's southeastern border, part of the Appalachian region, are some of the poorest, with a poverty rate of 17.2 percent. And in Cuyahoga County—home to Cleveland, the second largest city in the state—an estimated 18.3 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

According to a study by the Urban Institute, which estimates the effect of the new rule, approximately 20,000 Ohio residents will lose SNAP benefits. The same study estimates that changes to waivers will lower the percentage of Ohioans who are both living under the poverty line and receiving SNAP benefits from 16 percent to just 4 percent.

Even with the help of SNAP benefits, Ohioans continue to struggle with food insecurity. Cuyahoga County has the highest number of residents with food insecurity at 18.6 percent of residents compared to the state and national rate of 15.1 percent and 12.9 percent, respectively. Out of the county's SNAP recipients, 80 percent still rely on local food programs such as foodbanks to battle hunger. With the cuts to SNAP, pressure on foodbanks to meet growing needs will only increase.

"The cuts are basically an unfunded mandate onto the emergency food assistance network," Hamler-Fugitt explained. "Now you will have floods of people standing in line with other working Ohioans who aren't poor enough to get SNAP. There is no assistance from the federal government to help the foodbanks meet the new demand."

Hamler-Fugitt pointed out that the cuts will have a negative impact on entire communities, not just SNAP recipients. "This will probably have a catastrophic impact on the ability for rural communities to maintain full-service grocery stores, creating more food deserts, which in turn will impact the health of the community, exacerbating chronic health conditions like obesity."

There are also a considerable amount of logistical difficulties that come with the brazen attacks on SNAP benefits. Counties that are affected by the loss of waivers will have to notify all SNAP beneficiaries in a short time frame with no increase to their budget or employee workforce. There is also no comprehensive system in place for caseworkers and SNAP recipients to report logged work hours, a requirement for people who will lose their waiver and become responsible for proving minimum work hours.

"It's going to be a bureaucratic nightmare," Hamler-Fugitt stated. "Many people who will be affected by this change have phones with limited minutes, e-mail addresses they rarely check, and their addresses on file are void since they are homeless or forced to move frequently. Our experience is that when we send out mass notifications, more than half of them never reach the person. Most people end up finding

out their benefits have been slashed when they reach the checkout counter and hand over their Ohio Direction Card and they're told there is nothing on it."

The rule restricting work waivers is the first of three total proposals to near its initiation. The other proposals—one capping deductions for utility allowances, and the other aimed at cutting SNAP benefits for working-class families—will further impact food stamp recipients in Ohio and across the country. The aforementioned Urban Institute study estimates that the three proposals combined would cut 3.6 million people from SNAP benefits, reduce monthly benefits for millions more, and lead to 982,000 students losing access to free school meal services.

On the topic of the standard utility allowance proposal, Hamler-Fugitt said, "This will serve as an even broader attack. We estimate that about 40 percent of the states' SNAP population will be affected by it, which is upwards of 300,000-plus households across the state. Families will lose about \$42 a month. Think of that as an entire week of lost groceries."

At the same time, Ohioans face severe attacks on their health care. Last year, Ohio joined 17 other states in seeking approval from the federal government to implement Medicaid work requirements. Work requirements—which have been approved but not yet implemented—are expected to cut 60,000 Ohio residents from their health care coverage. However, the estimate is subject to change as people lose SNAP benefit waivers. One of the exemptions from the new Medicaid work requirements is compliance with SNAP work requirements or possession of a work requirement waiver, which, come April, will be increasingly difficult to acquire.



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