

“A Modest Iowa Proposal” to ban access to fresh meat and other grocery staples for SNAP recipients

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While workers and their families struggle to put food on the table as prices for grocery staples soar, the superrich continue to literally gorge themselves on rare, luxury menu items at exclusive eateries in Manhattan, Chicago and Los Angeles.

- The discriminating diner can expect to pay \$950 for sushi as part of the “Hinoki Counter Experience” at the Masa restaurant in Manhattan (exclusive of beverages and tax). Bottle corkage fees are \$200 a pop.

- Meanwhile in Iowa, Republicans in the state legislature are proposing to ban food stamp recipients from purchasing fresh meat with their benefits, pointing them instead to canned fish.

Earlier this month, Iowa House Republicans drafted a bill that would impose strict limitations on what the beneficiaries of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) can purchase through the program previously known as Food Stamps.

The bill, House File 3, would base what can be purchased through SNAP on the approved food list for Iowa’s Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. The WIC program list of approved foods is extremely limited—and nutritionally outdated—and was created to provide *supplemental* nutrition to pregnant and postpartum women and children up to five years old.

Approved WIC grocery items include select cereals (no added fruit, yogurt or nuts), whole grain breads, whole wheat pasta, brown rice, canned and dried beans, peanut butter, canned tuna and salmon, 100 percent fruit juice, some dairy products and baby food.

A partial list of foods *not* allowed, according to the bill, includes fresh meats (beef, chicken, pork, lamb), fresh seafood, chili or refried beans, cooking oil, butter, spices, salt and pepper, soups or soup mix, canned vegetables and fruit, milk, eggs or tofu that make special health claims, frozen prepared food, and sliced, cubed, crumbled or deli cheese. Coffee, the second most popular beverage in

America after water, and tea are also not allowed.

The all-American lunch of grilled cheese, made with white bread and sliced American cheese, and tomato soup would be off the menu for the low-income, older and disabled Iowans who rely on SNAP benefits. Frozen pizza would also be off limits. Those who want to bake their own bread, cakes or other baked goods would need to obtain their flour, even whole grain flour, by other means.

Thirty-nine Iowa Republicans have co-sponsored the reactionary legislation, led by Iowa House Speaker Pat Grassley, grandson of Republican Chuck Grassley, the longest-serving Republican member of the US Senate. The senior Grassley appeared alongside Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Sioux City on the eve of the November midterm elections, where the former president peddled his stolen election lies.

The proposed Iowa bill dictates not only what SNAP recipients can buy but who qualifies for food assistance. It targets several other public assistance programs, such as Medicaid, and lowers the income level for Iowans to qualify for SNAP benefits. A House subcommittee is currently considering the bill.

Speaker Grassley railed against SNAP. “It’s these entitlement programs,” he said. “They’re the ones that are growing within the budget and are putting pressure on us being able to fund other priorities.”

SNAP is fully funded by the federal government, although the states cover some administrative costs. Last year, Iowa had a state budget surplus of \$2 billion, and it cut its corporate tax rate from 9.8 percent to 8.4 percent. The proposed SNAP restrictions have nothing to do with a budget crunch but are a wholly punitive measure.

The bill would set a household asset limit to qualify for food stamps in Iowa at \$2,750, meaning that people with a net worth exceeding that threshold would not get the benefit. The asset limit would rise to \$4,250 if one person in the household is disabled or over the age of 60. This means that

a household owning two vehicles, for instance, would most likely not qualify. These asset limits correspond to the abysmal federal guidelines for SNAP, discouraging people from saving or owning virtually anything of value.

The Iowa proposal comes as SNAP benefits are expected to decrease for millions of recipients across the US by March at the latest, due to cuts included as part of the 2023 omnibus spending bill. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2023, Congress voted to increase SNAP benefits through emergency allotments (EAs).

Although the Department of Health and Human Services recently renewed the COVID-19 public health emergency, the Biden administration is ending the EAs. Ellen Vollinger, SNAP director for the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), told Food Tank, “It’s expected that the loss of EAs will cost about \$82 a SNAP participant a month.” As far as working families and the poor are concerned, learning to “live with the virus” will be accompanied by learning to live with less food and nutrition.

Feeding America estimates that for every meal the nonprofit’s network provides, SNAP benefits provide nine. Provisions in the omnibus spending bill would provide qualifying low-income families with a \$40 monthly grocery benefit per child. Families would be eligible for these benefits if the children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. However, this will be paid for by cutting the SNAP emergency allotments.

The spending bill also provided an additional \$44.9 billion in emergency aid to fund the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia. President Biden has just announced that the US will be sending 31 Abrams heavy tanks to Ukraine. The ruling elite is clearly signaling where its priorities lie—with war and against the social needs of the population.

The cutting of the SNAP EAs to fund the new monthly benefit is a bipartisan proposal, sponsored by Sens. Debbie Stabenow (Democrat of Michigan), John Boozman (Republican of Arkansas) and Rep. Bobby Scott (Democrat of Virginia).

For older Americans, who are typically part of small households and receive the minimum benefit level, FRAC estimates that they will see their monthly SNAP benefits fall from \$281 to the pre-pandemic level of just \$23 a month, an amount that would pay for about four dozen of the cheapest large cage-free eggs at Walmart at current prices.

As with COVID-19, seniors and other vulnerable segments of society will see the greatest impact from the cutting of food stamps. According to Propel, a financial services technology company that has designed a smartphone app for SNAP participants, in 2022, 45 percent of Propel app users were already running low or had run out of basic food items.

In the states that have already cut off their EAs, that figure jumps to 52 percent.

SNAP benefits were accessed by about 38 million Americans in 2019, or about 12 percent of the population, including 17 percent of children. More than 14 percent of households in seven states receive food stamps—New Mexico, West Virginia, Louisiana, Oregon, Rhode Island, Mississippi and New York. SNAP is the largest nutrition program of the 15 administered by the Department of Agriculture under the Food and Nutrition Service.

As such, it is a prime target for cutbacks by the ruling class of both big business parties. These cuts, along with other changes to the federal free and reduced cost school lunch program, will spell increased hunger and malnutrition, placing the health and lives of millions of people at risk, particularly older Americans and children. It is a recipe for obesity, diabetes and ill health, as families seek to round out their diets with cheap food.

The draconian Iowa proposal to prohibit SNAP participants from using their benefits to purchase fresh meat and other basic foods brings to mind Jonathan Swift’s 1729 satirical essay “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to the Publick.”

The essay suggests, along with other proposals, that impoverished people might ease their economic troubles by selling their children as food to rich gentlemen and ladies. Swift wrote:

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout.

In the present situation, the wealthy gentlemen and ladies seek to rob children, their parents and grandparents of basic foodstuffs so that they might satisfy ruling class gluttony in the service of profit, social misery and war. Proposals like that in Iowa will be met with the popular outrage that they deserve.



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