

# ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Alaska News

## Alaska prepares for changes in food stamps program that will reduce number of recipients

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*A sign indicates a store that accepts the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or SNAP, the official name of the food stamp program. [File photo]*

JUNEAU - About 5,000 Alaskans could lose food stamp benefits under new federal rules set to take effect April 1, a state public assistance official said.

Shawnda O'Brien, director of the state Division of Public Assistance, said an estimated 80,000 people in Alaska received food assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program as of January.

Currently, work-eligible, able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 49 who have no dependents can receive only three months of food stamps in a three-year period if they don't meet work or work program requirements or fall within an exception, such as being pregnant or medically certified as unfit for employment.

States have been able to seek waivers in areas with high unemployment or limited jobs. Alaska, until October, had a statewide waiver, O'Brien said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in explaining the federal rules change, said states had taken advantage of "weaknesses" in regulations to seek waivers. The new rules tighten standards for states seeking waivers.

The Trump administration sees the planned changes as encouraging more people to work. But Eve Van Dommelen, policy and advocacy manager with the Food Bank of Alaska and manager of the Alaska Food Coalition, said the plans don't help people when they lose benefits and worries the change could further strain food banks already facing high demands in parts of Alaska.

"Implementing this rule doesn't help people get jobs. It just means that when they lose those food benefits, rather than being able to spend time looking for a job, they're spending time looking for food now," she said.

New standards for waivers include labor data showing an unemployment rate of more than 10% over a year or unemployment of no less than 6% over two years. O'Brien said Alaska proposed working under the latter and chose a time-frame of November 2017 to November 2019.

O'Brien said the federal government on Monday approved Alaska's request for a waiver that would exempt 21 of the state's 29 boroughs or census areas from the new rules. Prominent population centers, including Anchorage, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Juneau and the Fairbanks North Star Borough, would not be exempt, she said.

Van Dommelen said a period could have been chosen that would have included Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. O'Brien said the state tried to be as equitable as possible while putting forward a plan that exempted more areas than had been since October.

Last year, anticipating a change in the rules, the state sought a waiver it thought would be comparable to the new rules, to prepare people, O'Brien said. Under that approach, 17 boroughs or census areas were exempted, she said.

There still may be general work requirements that individuals in this group have to meet, such as registering for work.

#### **About this Author**

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