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Dunleavy administration seeks to tighten work requirements for some food stamp recipients

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(Tribune Content Agency)

Gov. Mike Dunleavy's administration is seeking to tighten rules about how much some low-income adults who receive federal food assistance in Alaska must work in order to receive such benefits, a spokesman for the governor said.

The change would implement a set of federal work requirements for recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, also called food stamps, in a state that has long had a waiver from those rules.

The administration wants to make the change in order “to comply with the spirit and intent” of federal rules, said Dunleavy spokesman Matt Shuckerow.

“SNAP is a program that is a safety net for people in their time of need, but also is a program that is clearly about encouraging participation in the workforce and self-sufficiency,” he said.

The move has raised concern from the Food Bank of Alaska, which said the change will further impact food insecurity at a time when assistance services are already strained in the wake of Dunleavy’s recent vetoes to the state’s budget.

Alaska for years has had a statewide waiver that allows SNAP recipients to be exempt from federal requirements over how much able-bodied adults without dependents have to work or participate in an employment program to get that assistance. The federal government allows states to request that exception if all or parts of a state have an unemployment rate over 10% or if there aren’t enough jobs available, which is an issue in rural Alaska.

Without the waiver, adults ages 18 to 49 who fall into that category have to participate in employment, work training or an approved volunteer position at least 20 hours a week to get food stamps. If they don’t fulfill those work requirements, without the waiver, they are subject to a three-month limit of the benefits over three years.

The state has requested that the waiver be amended for areas of Alaska where the unemployment rate is lower than 10%. Able-bodied adults without dependents and in that age group would no longer be exempt from the work requirements in such areas come Oct. 1, Shuckerow said.

Those areas, encompassing much of the state’s population, include Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Juneau, Ketchikan Gateway Borough, Aleutians East Borough, Aleutians West Borough, Anchorage, Dillingham Census Area, Kodiak Island Borough, North Slope Borough, and Sitka, Shuckerow said in an email.

In Alaska, as many as 6,917 current food stamp recipients — about 7.9% of total SNAP recipients in the state — would have to meet the work requirements starting in October, Shuckerow said. About 9,745 Alaskans currently benefit from the waiver, according to the Food Bank of Alaska.

[Providers say low-income children, families in Alaska will bear disproportionate weight of Dunleavy budget vetoes]

“Given the variety of allowable work related activities, the department is not anticipating a large number of individuals will lose eligibility,” Shuckerow said via email.

Food Bank of Alaska representatives are concerned for people who use SNAP in communities where jobs are more scarce and they may not be able to fulfill work requirements.

“The waiver provides our state with an important tool to protect vulnerable citizens, and to ease the burden of administering this complicated rule in a state with unique challenges,” the food bank said in a written statement.

Revising the waiver would likely be another hit to populations that are impacted by Dunleavy’s budget cuts to other services, said Food Bank of Alaska spokeswoman Cara Durr.

“I think a lot of the same people that are going to be affected by the governor’s vetoes, homelessness and things like that, will also be affected by this,” she said. “It’s kind of compounding.”

In his vetoes to the state operating budget, Dunleavy has cut funding to other forms of assistance, such as homeless services and Medicaid. He wants to balance the state budget without raising taxes or reducing the Permanent Fund dividend.

This SNAP change “is not being treated as a direct cost-saving measure,” Shuckerow said in a phone interview.

The federal government funds 100% of the SNAP program, and the state pays half the cost of operating the program here, according to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services website. These time limit work requirement rules for SNAP have been in place since 1996.

As of June, Alaska had 87,686 recipients of SNAP, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Alaska has had the statewide waiver largely since 2004, and before that year had partial waivers in various parts of the state, according to the Food Bank of Alaska.

The state has submitted its request to the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service, and anticipates a response from the agency within the next several weeks, Shuckerow said.

A similar change has also been introduced at the federal level. The USDA proposed a new rule that would “encourage broader application” of the work requirements. A comment period for that proposed rule ended in April, and it is now in the final stage of the rule-making process, according to the federal Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs website.

In March, Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski co-led a charge with other lawmakers urging Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue to withdraw that proposal.

“The proposed changes would take food assistance away from Americans struggling to find stable employment while doing nothing to help them to actually become permanently employed,” said a letter signed by Murkowski and more than 40 other senators.

About this Author

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Annie Zak was a business reporter for the ADN between 2015 and 2019.
