



# Food on the table

Trump administration wants to cut food stamps, but California goes to court

BY JACKIE BOTTS / CalMatters

## Fourteen states, including California, filed suit

Jan. 16 against the Trump administration to block a rule that would eliminate food stamps for an estimated 688,000 Americans.

"No one should have to choose between a hot meal and paying their rent," California Attorney General Xavier Becerra said in a statement. "Yet again, the Trump Administration has failed to offer any legitimate evidence to justify decisions that have real consequences for the health and well-being of our residents."

The states plus Washington, D.C., and New York City are claiming that the Trump administration failed to follow the steps required to enact such a far-sweeping rule.

The new rule, scheduled to go into effect on April 1, requires that adults without children must work at least 20 hours per week to consistently receive food stamps. In California, that will initially affect about 400,000 Californians, or 11% of people currently getting food stamps, according to the state Department of Social Services.

For a decade, states and counties have gotten that limit waived by demonstrating that the local labor market made it hard for people to find jobs. All but six California counties—Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, Santa Clara and San Mateo—have waivers.

The new federal rule makes that waiver much more elusive in most of the state. A city or county must have an unemployment rate of at least 6% to qualify. California closed 2019 with a statewide unemployment rate of just under 4%. An estimated 40 California counties would be subject to the 20-hour work requirement starting April 1, while 18 central and northern counties would be spared initially due to their higher unemployment rates.

## WHY DID THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DO IT?

When he announced the rule in December, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said it will restore the original intent of food stamps: "self-sufficiency."

But anti-poverty advocates reject the claim that limiting food stamps will encourage people to work more, citing evidence that food stamp work requirements have failed in other places. The initial proposal spurred more than 140,000 public comments, with many calling the policy outdated and cruel.

In the first year, more than 55,000 Californians are expected to lose the benefit, according to Becerra's office, which amounts to more than \$100 million in lost benefits. The lawsuit claims that women and people of color would be most affected because they face higher barriers to employment.

Other groups at risk of losing their food stamps include people experiencing homelessness, veterans, people recently out of jail or prison and former foster youth, according to Jessica Bartholow, a policy advocate at the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

## HOW IS THE STATE GETTING READY?

State and county officials are reaching out to all recipients subject to the new requirements, alerting them of the change and getting as many as possible into local employment and training programs. Through those programs, affected adults can keep their CalFresh benefits.

Also, state lawmakers and advisers to the governor are exploring ways that the state could provide a Band-aid if the rule survives the courtroom.

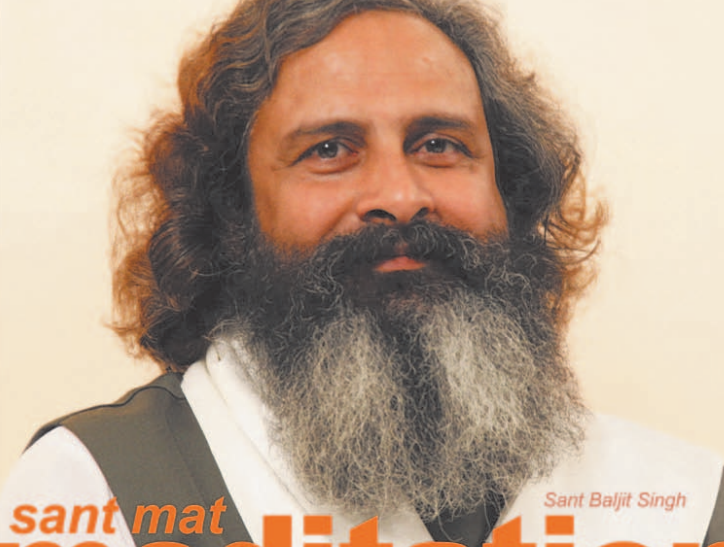
For the first few months, the state plans to shield people from the new requirements using a backlog of month-long exemptions to the work requirement that the state has been banking. Under the new rule, those exemptions will disappear in the fall.

One solution is to use state funds to provide food stamps. That's the idea behind a bill introduced last year by Assemblywoman Buffy Wicks, a Democrat from Oakland.

That could be pricey. The state estimates it could lose as much as \$400 million in federal funding for CalFresh if all three of the proposed food stamp rules go into effect.

"The state is not in a position to backfill directly the federal contributions by writing a \$400 million check," Gov. Gavin Newsom said last week. But, he added, his administration is looking at ways "to significantly minimize" that cost. He said he had put \$20 million for food banks in his proposed budget as a "placeholder."

Jackie Botts is a reporter at CalMatters. This article is part of The California Divide, a collaboration among newsrooms examining income inequity and economic survival in California. The full story is available at CalMatters.org.




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