



Support for 'block granting' food stamps continues to grow

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Republican control of Washington, D.C., in 2017 means returning Illinois state officials may soon have more control of the federally funded food stamps program.

GOP leaders in Congress would prefer "block granting" funding for the program to states, whose leaders could then design their own versions.

Under President Barack Obama, food stamp usage expanded by 60 percent nationally and especially in Illinois. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over 1 million Illinois households -- more than one in five -- now receive food stamps, which amount to \$357 per month for a family of two, or \$649 per month for a family of four.

Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute addressed food stamp reform and what it would mean for Illinois.

"It's grown so much because the government has liberalized the benefits and strongly encourages people to take the benefits," Edwards said.

Currently, there are "46 million recipients" of the SNAP Program and it heavily costs taxpayers, he said. In Congress, however, Edwards noted that there are few leaders who actually expect the SNAP Program to be cancelled.

"Unfortunately, few members of Congress want to cut the program, despite the fact that the cost has exploded and the federal government has a massive budget deficit," he said.

According to a recent article by the *Daily Caller*, the federal government currently spends a yearly budget of \$110 million on SNAP. Edwards said that this outgoing money will "account for more than two-thirds of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's budget." Such budget money goes not only to SNAP, but to WIC and school food, as well.

Created in 1939, the SNAP program served as temporary assistance for many low-income families. During the 1970s, the recipient number spiked; since then, it has continued to climb.

Geared to help low-income families pay for healthy and nutritious food, the SNAP Program proves difficult when trying to enforce specific rules, the *Daily Caller* reported. Because of this, the publication explained, these are "soft guidelines."

Additionally, the *Daily Caller* reported many items that can be purchased with an EBT card that are not exactly food-related. Such purchases include: bail money, lingerie, Payless ShoeSource and all grocery stores, which often include Starbucks.

Although food and drink products like alcohol, tobacco and pet food are strongly forbidden, the *Daily Caller* said that the "SNAP program doesn't have any way to actually enforce the rules."

Edwards encourages the new block grant program, designed to help the states for food stamps.

"Block grants would be a good reform because, with a fixed grant, the states would have a stronger incentive to only give benefits to people who really needed them and to crack down on waste," he said. "If the states were paying for the program themselves, they would have more incentive to crack down on waste."

The new block grant program will go before the Agricultural Committee this year. After a ruling has been made, it will determine if this federal program will continue to thrive in the current way, or if states will hold power over it.