

MPRnews

In Minn., officials say food program could find ways to absorb federal cuts

By: Julie Siple - March 1, 2013

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Across-the-board budget cuts were set to take effect just before midnight Friday without a deal in Washington. The cuts will hit everything from national parks to air traffic.

The cuts will affect the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, commonly known as WIC. It provides healthy food and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

The program provides benefits to about 125,000 low-income people in Minnesota every month. But the consequences may be less dire than some in Washington have predicted.

Earlier this week, it was business as usual at the WIC Northside Clinic in Brooklyn Center. James and JoAnn Wright tried to keep their 1-year-old daughter occupied while Mrs. Wright answered questions from nutritionist Nafisa Farah.

They spoke about the child's food consumption -- lunch that day was a turkey sandwich -- and Farah offered advice on avoiding food-borne illness.

After counseling, the Wrights received vouchers for specific foods they can get for free at the grocery store: eggs, whole-wheat bread, fruits and vegetables.

Mrs. Wright said that without WIC, they would feed their daughter less fresh produce and run short on baby formula -- even though both she and her husband work.

Larger view

Weighing son

"A month's worth of formula almost costs as much as a week's worth of day care," Mrs. Wright said. "We just couldn't add that on top of our day care expenses."

The WIC program will undergo a 5.1 percent reduction with the sequester cuts. But it's unclear what that means for people in the program.

The Obama administration estimates that 600,000 mothers and children would be dropped by the end of September. The National WIC Association predicted that 8,700 Minnesota residents would be affected.

But Betsy Clarke, the state's WIC director, said the process might not unfold as predicted.

"There's a good chance that we can find a way to manage that cut without waiting lists and without a situation where certain applicants wouldn't be served," Clarke said.

In other words, perhaps no one will be cut from the program.

Clarke anticipated that WIC would take a \$7 million hit in Minnesota. She received news from the USDA this week that the program can continue as usual through March. After that, she doesn't have any numbers from the federal government. But she thinks Minnesota may be in better shape than other states because of good planning and a falling birth rate.

Plus, she could change the foods that participants receive free with WIC, by eliminating the more expensive brands or making other alterations.

"We could make some changes like switching out beans for peanut butter," Clarke said. "That would be an example of the kinds of things we could do that would probably save enough money to get us through."

Clarke would not discuss who would lose services first, if it comes to that. But the USDA has made it clear. WIC participants are ranked according to nutritional risk. Postpartum women who are not breastfeeding are near the bottom and would be cut first. African-American women breastfeed at lower rates than others, so cuts would disproportionately hit them.

But some conservatives say that even if people lose benefits, the danger is overblown.

"This would only take the spending for WIC back to slightly above the levels that the spending was in 2008," said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian CATO Institute in Washington, D.C. "And in 2008, we managed to avoid mass starvation in this country. The fact is that we are going to have to cut spending, and all the programs are going to have to take a share of this."

Advocates for the poor say that since 2008, the nation has seen a recession and more families in need.

At the clinic in Brooklyn Park, Hennepin County WIC coordinator Karen Mayer speculated about what it would mean if some families did not receive benefits.

She said the program is designed to make sure children get the nutrition they need to prevent health and education problems later. Mayer said families would be forced to make changes immediately.

"They'll buy cheaper foods," Mayer said. "If they're getting formula from us, they might water down the formula. And that's not good. Babies can get in severe trouble if you water down the formula. Because they're not getting enough calories, and that's where you start getting babies failing to thrive and losing weight."

Her biggest worry right now is that all the talk about cuts will confuse people who need help.

"Our concern is that people who could use our program won't even contact us, or people who could use our program won't even come in," she said.

She said that happened during the Minnesota state government shutdown in 2011. Mayer emphasized that that they are open and serving clients.